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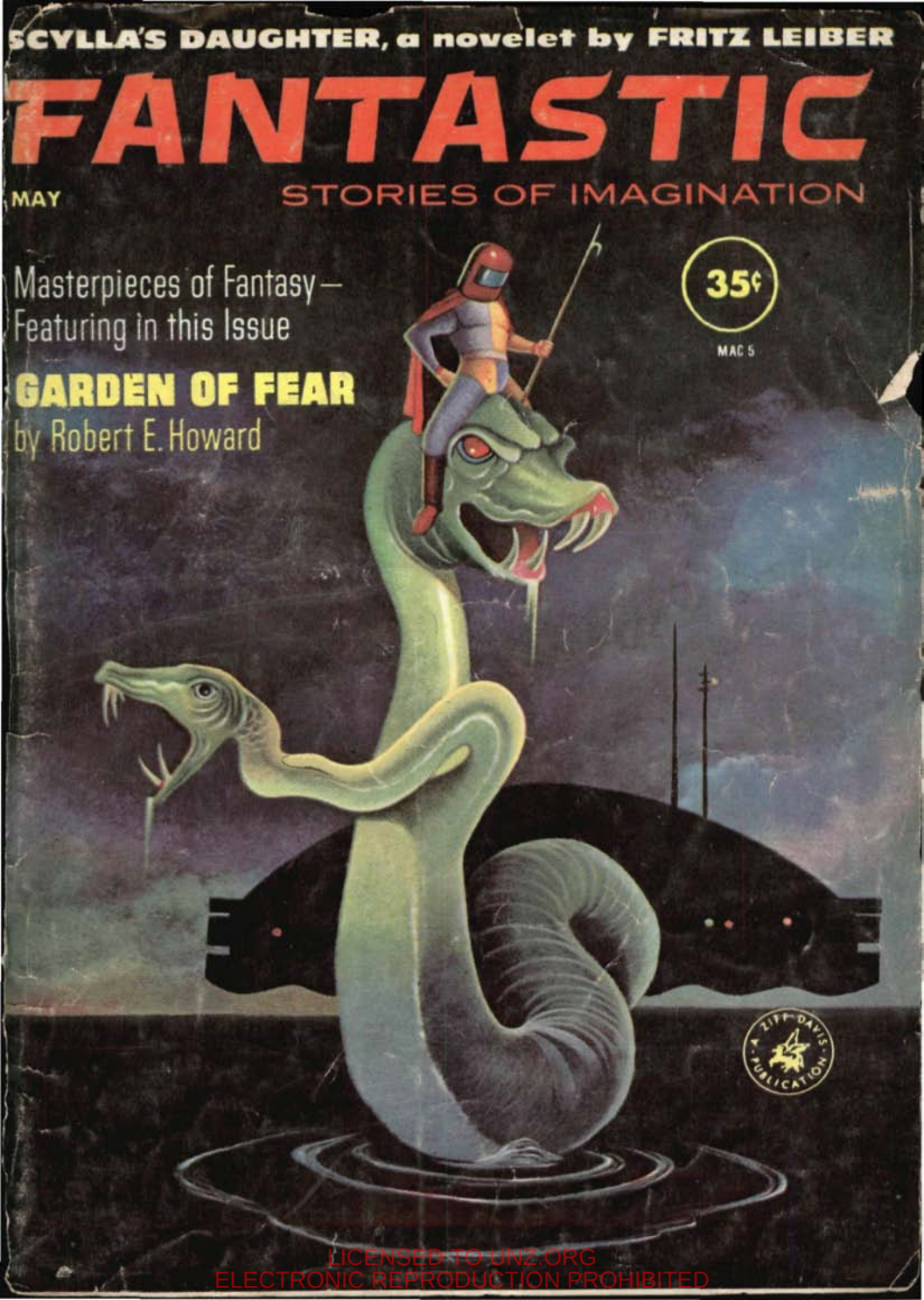

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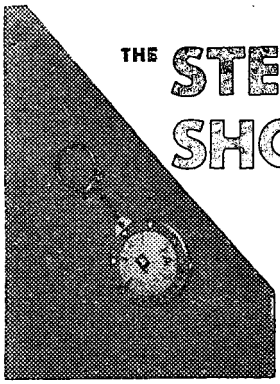

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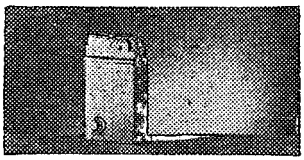

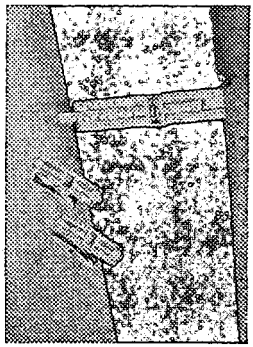

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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

MAY 1961
Volume 10 Number 5

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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MICHAEL MICHAELSON

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CELE GOLDSMITH

NOVELETS

SCYLLA'S DAUGHTER
By Fritz Leiber 6

ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN?
By Jack Sharkey 86

SHORT STORIES

GARDEN OF FEAR
By Robert E. Howard 65

THE PROBLEM WAS LUBRICATION
By David R. Bunch 82

THE ARROGANT VAMPIRE
By Arthur Porges 118

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 5

ACCORDING TO YOU 125

COMING NEXT MONTH 130

Cover: VERNON KRAMER

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ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, New York. William Ziff, President; W. Bradford Briggs, Executive Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; H. B. Sarbin, Vice President; Charles Housman, Financial Vice President; Richard Kislik, Treasurer.

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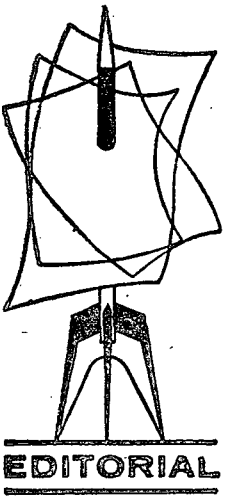

THE WORLD of dreams is a world precious to those of us who fantasize. For in the tangle of day-buried, night-freed thoughts and feelings and symbols lie, perhaps, the key to many mysteries—mysteries of self, of race, of the Unknown.

Science has long attempted to penetrate this weedy forest of the subconscious. And now, it seems, they are learning enough bits and pieces about the mechanisms of dreaming so that even dreams may soon no longer be safe from prying.

Psychiatrists—who monkey around with their patients' dreams and indulge themselves in interpretation—have been monitoring them lately in a more-than-usual scientific way—mostly by studying brain waves and eye-muscle movements, and also by awakening subjects to have them report on dreams. Their findings include the following tempting morsels:

• the average person dreams between four and seven times each night;

• although the manifest content of each dream was different, through all of them ran the thread of the same personal problem;

• the dreams of a single night may range from the pleasant to the extremely unpleasant;

• there seems to be a "retrogressing" toward deeper centers, toward an earlier life-period, as consciousness slips further into darkness. The first dream of the night usually involves a recent incident or situation in the subject's life. But succeeding dreams involve people or places or things that fall into earlier years. Then, usually, the last dream involves current material again— perhaps signifying that consciousness is swimming back from the caves of night.

* * *

WITH this issue FANTASTIC begins a new series that we think you will all like: reprints of classic stories of fantasy that have either been out-of-print, never-before-published professionally, or simply so magnificent as to warrant making them available again to both veterans and newcomers. To begin the series we have chosen the late Robert Howard's *"Garden of Fear."* In future issues you will be reading masterpieces by such men as Clark Ashton Smith, Eric Frank Russell, A. E. Van Vogt, and many many more.

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Scylla's Daughter

By FRITZ LEIBER

Illustrator SUMMERS

The fleet was the third sent to tribute to Movarl. On the foredeck the captain told how the first two fleets had vanished, and a seaman's body gnawed. "By fish?" asked the Mouser. "Seabirds?" Fafhrd inquired. "Dragons?" suggested the Demoiselle Hisvet. And so Mr. Leiber begins this incredible novelet of the world of Lankhmar.

WITH the motherly-generous west wind filling their brown triangular sails, the slim war galley and the five broad-beamed grain ships, two nights out of

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Lankhmar, coursed north in line ahead across the Inner Sea of the ancient world of Nehwon.

It was late afternoon of one of those mild blue days when sea and sky are the same hue, providing irrefutable evidence for the hypothesis currently favored by Lankhmar philosophers: that Nehwon is a giant bubble rising through the waters of eternity with continents, islands, and the great jewels that at night are the stars all orderly afloat on the bubble's inner surface.

On the afterdeck of the last grain ship, which was also the largest, the Gray Mouser spat a plum skin to leeward and boasted luxuriously, "Fat times in Lankhmar! Not one day returned to the City of the Black Toga after months away adventuring and I procure us this cushy job from the Overlord himself."

"I have an old distrust of cushy jobs," Fafhrd replied, yawning and pulling his fur-trimmed jerkin open wider so that the mild wind might trickle more fully through the tangled hair-field of his chest. "And you got us out of Lankhmar so quickly that we had not even time to pay our respects to the ladies. Nevertheless I must confess that you might have done worse. A full purse is the best ballast for any man-ship, especially one bearing letters of marque against ladies."

Ship's Master Slinoor looked back with hooded appraising eyes at the small lithe gray-clad man and his tall, more gaudily accoutered barbarian comrade. The master of the *Squid* was a sleek black-robed man of middle years. He stood beside the two stocky black-tunicked bare-legged sailors who held steady the great high-arching tiller that guided the *Squid*.

"How much do you two rogues really know of your cushy job?" Slinoor asked softly. "Or rather, how much did the arch-noble Glipkerio choose to tell you of the purpose and dark antecedents of this voyaging?" Two days of fortunate sailing seemed at last to have put the closed-mouthed ship's master in a mood to exchange confidences, or at least trade queries and lies.

From a bag of netted cord that hung by the taffrail, the Mouser speared a night-purple plum with the hook-bladed dirk he called Cat's Claw. Then he answered lightly, "This fleet bears a gift of grain from Overlord Glipkerio to Movarl of the Eight Cities in gratitude for Movarl's sweeping the Mingol pirates from the Inner Sea and mayhap diverting the steppe-dwelling Mingols from assaulting Lankhmar across the Sinking Land. Movarl needs grain for his hunter-farmers turned cityman-soldiers and especially to supply his army re-

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lieving his border city of Klelg Nar, which the Mingols besiege. Fafhrd and I are, you might say, a small but mighty rear-guard for the grain and for certain more delicate items of Glipkerio's gift."

"You mean those?" Slinoor bent a thumb toward the larboard rail.

Those were twelve large white rats distributed among four silver-barred cages. With their silky coats, pale-rimmed blue eyes and especially their short, arched upper lips and two huge upper incisors, they looked like a clique of haughty, bored inbred aristocrats, and it was in a bored aristocratic fashion that they were staring at a scrawny black kitten which was perched with dug-in claws on the starboard rail, as if to get as far away from the rats as possible, and staring back at them most worriedly.

FAFHRD reached out and ran a finger down the black kitten's back. The kitten arched its spine, losing itself for a moment in sensuous delight, but then edged away and resumed its worried rat-peering—an activity shared by the two black-tunicked helmsmen, who seemed both resentful and fearful of the silver-caged afterdeck passengers.

The Mouser sucked plum juice from his fingers and flicked out his tongue-tip to neatly capture a drop that threatened to run down his chin. Then, "No, I mean not chiefly those high-bred gift rats," he replied to Slinoor and kneeling lightly and unexpectedly and touching two fingers significantly to the scrubbed oak deck, he said, "I mean chiefly *she* who is below, who ousts you from your master's cabin, and who now insists that the gift-rats require sunlight and fresh air—which strikes me as a strange way of cosseting burrow and shadow-dwelling vermin."

Slinoor's cropped eyebrows rose. He came close and whispered, "You think the Demoiselle Hisvet may not be merely the conductress of the rat-gift, but also herself part of Glipkerio's gift to Movarl? Why, she's the daughter of the greatest grain merchant in Lankhmar, who's grown rich selling tawny corn to Glipkerio."

The Mouser smiled cryptically but said nothing.

Slinoor frowned, then whispered even lower, "True, I've heard the story that Hisvet has already been her father Hisven's gift to Glipkerio to buy his patronage."

Fafhrd, who'd been trying to stroke the kitten again with no more success than to chase it up the aftermast, turned around at that. "Why, Hisvet's but a child," he said almost reprovingly. "A most prim and proper miss. I

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know not of Glipkerio, he seems decadent—" (The word was not an insult in Lankhmar) "—but surely Movarl, a northerner albeit a forest man, likes only strong-beamed, ripe, complete women."

"Your own tastes, no doubt?" the Mouser remarked, gazing at Fafhrd with half-closed eyes. "No traffic with childlike women?"

Fafhrd blinked as if the Mouser had dug fingers in his side. Then he shrugged and said loudly, "What's so special about these rats? Do they do tricks?"

"Aye," Slinoor said distastefully. "They play at being men. They've been trained by Hisvet to dance to music, to drink from cups, hold tiny spears and swords, even fence. I've not seen it—nor would care to."

The picture struck the Mouser's fancy. He visioned himself small as a rat, dueling with rats who wore lace at their throats and wrists, slipping through the mazy tunnels of their underground cities, becoming a great connoisseur of cheese and smoked meats, perchance wooing a slim rat queen and being surprised by her rat-king husband and having to dagger-fight him in the dark. Then he noted one of the white rats looking at him intently through the silver bars with a cold inhuman blue eye and suddenly his idea didn't seem amusing at all. He shivered in the sunlight.

Slinoor was saying, "It is not good for animals to try to be men." The *Squid's* skipper gazed somberly at the silent white aristos. "Have you ever heard tell of the legend of—" he began, hesitated, then broke off, shaking his head as if deciding he had been about to say too much.

"A sail!" The call winged down thinly from the crow's nest. "A black sail to windward!"

"What manner of ship?" Slinoor shouted up.

"I know not, master. I see only sail top."

"Keep her under view, boy," Slinoor commanded.

"Under view it is, master."

Slinoor paced to the starboard rail and back.

"Movarl's sails are green," Fafhrd said thoughtfully.

Slinoor nodded. "Ilthmar's are white. The pirates' were red, mostly. Lankhmar's sails once were black, but now that color's only for funeral barges and they never venture out of sight of land. At least I've never known . . ."

The Mouser broke in with, "You spoke of dark antecedents of this voyaging. Why dark?"

SLINOOR drew them back against the taffrail, away from the stocky helmsmen. Fafhrd ducked a little, passing

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under the arching tiller. They looked all three into the twisting wake, their heads bent together.

Slinoor said, "You've been out of Lankhmar. Did you know this is not the first gift-fleet of grain to Movarl?"

The Mouser nodded. "We'd been told there was another. Somehow lost. In a storm, I think. Glipkerio glossed over it."

"There were two," Slinoor said tersely. "Both lost. Without a living trace. There was no storm."

"What then?" Fafhrd asked, looking around as the rats chittered a little. "Pirates?"

"Movarl had already whipped the pirates east. Each of the two fleets was galley-guarded like ours. And each sailed off into fair weather with a good west wind." Slinoor smiled thinly. "Doubtless Glipkerio did not tell you of these matters for fear you might beg off. We sailors and the Lankhmarines obey for duty and the honor of the City, but of late Glipkerio's had trouble hiring the sort of special agents he likes to use for second bow-strings. He has brains of a sort, our overlord has, though he employs them mostly to dream of visiting other world bubbles in a great diving-bell or sealed brass diving-ship, while he sits with trained girls watching trained rats and buys off Lankhmar's enemies with gold and repays Lankhmar's ever-more-impatient friends with grain not soldiers." Slinoor grunted. "Movarl grows most impatient, you know, He threatens, if the grain comes not, to recall his pirate patrol, league with the land-Mingols and set them at Lankhmar."

"Northerners, even though not snow-dwelling, league with Mingols?" Fafhrd objected. "Impossible!"

Slinoor looked at him. "I'll say just this, ice-eating northerner. If I did not believe such a leaguer both possible and likely—and Lankhmar thereby in dire danger—I would never have sailed with this fleet, honor and duty or no. Same's true of Lukeen who commands the galley. Nor do I think Glipkerio would otherwise be sending to Movarl at Kvarch Nar his noblest performing rats and dainty Hisvet."

Fafhrd growled a little. "You say both fleets were lost without a trace?" he asked incredulously.

Slinoor shook his head. "The first was. Of the second, some wreckage was sighted by an Ilthmar trader Lankhmar-bound. The deck of only one grain ship. It had been ripped off its hull, splinteringly—how or by that, the Ilthmart dared not guess. Tied to a fractured stretch of railing was the ship's-master, only hours dead. His face had been nibbled, his body gnawed."

"Fish?" the Mouser asked.

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"Seabirds?" Fafhrd inquired.

"Dragons?" a third voice suggested, high, breathless, and as merry as a school girl's. The three men turned around, Slinoor with guilty swiftness.

THE Demoiselle Hisvet stood as tall as the Mouser, but judging by her face, wrists, and ankles was considerably slenderer. Her face was delicate and taper-chinned with small mouth and pouty upper lip that lifted just enough to show a double dash of pearly tooth. Her complexion was creamy pale except for two spots of color high on her cheeks. Her straight fine hair, which grew low on her forehead, was pure white touched with silver and all drawn back through a silver ring behind her neck, whence it hung unbraided like a unicorn's tail. Her eyes had china whites but darkly pink irises around the large black pupils. Her body was enveloped and hidden by a loose robe of violet silk except when the wind briefly molded a flat curve of her girlish anatomy. There was a violet hood, half thrown back. The sleeves were puffed but snug at the wrists. She was barefoot, her skin showing as creamy there as on her face, except for a tinge of pink about the toes.

She looked them all three one after another quickly in the eye. "You were whispering of the fleets that failed," she said accusingly. "Fie, Master Slinoor. We must all have courage."

"Aye," Fafhrd agreed, finding that a cue to his liking. "Even dragons need not daunt a brave man. I've often watched the sea monsters, crested, horned, and some two-headed, playing in the waves of outer ocean as they broke around the rocks sailors call the Claws. They were not to be feared, if a man remembered always to fix them with a commanding eye. They sported lustily together, the man dragons pursuing the woman dragons and going—" Here Fafhrd took a tremendous breath and then roared out so loudly and wailingly that the two helmsmen jumped —*"Hoongk! Hoongk!"*

"Fie, Swordsman Fafhrd," Hisvet said primly, a blush mantling her cheeks and forehead. "You are most indelicate. The sex of dragons—"

But Slinoor had whirled on Fafhrd, gripping his wrist and now crying, "Quiet, you monster-fool! Know you not we sail tonight by moonlight past the Dragon Rocks? You'll call them down on us!"

"There are no dragons in the Inner Sea," Fafhrd laughingly assured him.

"There's something that tears ships," Slinoor asserted stubbornly.

The Mouser took advantage of

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this brief interchange to move in on Hisvet, rapidly bowing thrice as he approached.

"We have missed the great pleasure of your company on deck, Demoiselle," he said suavely.

"Alas, sir, the sun mislikes me," she answered prettily. "Now his rays are mellowed as he prepared to submerge. Then too," she added with an equally pretty shudder, "these rough sailors—" She broke off as she saw that Fafhrd and the master of the *Squid* had stopped their argument and returned to her. "Oh, I meant not you, dear Master Slinoor," she assured him, reaching out and almost touching his black robe.

"Would the Demoiselle fancy a sun-warmed, wind-cooled black plum of Sarheenmar?" the Mouser suggested, delicately sketching in the air with Cat's Claw.

"I know not." Hisvet said, eyeing the dirk's needlelike point. "I must be thinking of getting the White Shadows below before the evening's chill is upon us."

"True," Fafhrd agreed with a flattering laugh, realizing she must mean the white rats. "But 'twas most wise of you, little mistress, to let them spend the day on deck, where they surely cannot hanker so much to sport with the Black Shadows—I mean, of course, their black free commoner brothers, and slim delightful sisters, to be sure, hiding here and there in the hold."

"There are no rats on my ship, sportive or otherwise," Slinoor asserted instantly, his voice loud and angry. "Think you I run a rat-brothel? your pardon, Demoiselle," he added quickly to Hisvet. "I mean, there are no common rats aboard *Squid*."

"Then yours is surely the first grain ship so blessed," Fafhrd told him with indulgent reasonableness.

THE sun's vermillion disk touched the sea to the west and flattened like a tangerine. Hisvet leaned back against the taffrail under the arching tiller. Fafhrd was to her right, the Mouser to her left with the plums hanging just beyond him, near the silver cages. Slinoor had moved haughtily forward to speak to the helmsmen, or pretend to.

"I'll take that plum now, Dirksman Mouser," Hisvet said softly.

As the Mouser turned away in happy obedience and with many a graceful gesture, delicately palpating the net bag to find the most tender fruit, Hisvet stretched her right arm out sideways and without looking once at Fafhrd slowly ran her spread-fingered hand through the hair on his chest, paused when she reached the other side to grasp a fistful and tweak it sharply, then

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trailed her fingers lightly back across the hair she had ruffled.

Her hand came back to her just as the Mouser turned around. She kissed the palm lingeringly, then reached it across her body to take the black fruit from the point of the Mouser's dirk. She sucked delicately at the prick Cat's Claw had made and shivered.

"Fie, sir," she pouted. "You told me 'twould be sun-warmed and 'tis not. Already all things grow chilly with evening." She looked around her thoughtfully. "Why, Swordsman Fafhrd is all goose-flesh," she announced, then blushed and tapped her lips reprovingly. "Close your jerkin, sir. 'Twill save you from catarrh and perchance from further embarrassment a girl who is unused to any sight of man-flesh save in slaves."

"Here is a toastier plum," the Mouser called from beside the bag. Hisvet smiled at him and lightly tossed him backhanded the plum she'd sampled. He dropped that overboard and tossed her the second plum. She caught it deftly, lightly squeezed it, touched it to her lips, shook her head sadly though still smiling, and tossed back the plum. The Mouser, smiling gently too, caught it, dropped it overboard and tossed her a third. They played that way for some time. A shark following in the wake of the *Squid* got a stomachache.

The black kitten came singlefooting back along the starboard rail with a sharp eye to larboard. Fafhrd seized it instantly as any good general does opportunity in the heat of battle.

"Have you seen the ship's catling, little mistress?" he called, crossing to Hisvet, the kitten almost hidden in his big hands. "Or perhaps we should call the *Squid* the catling's ship, for she adopted it, skipping by herself aboard just as we sailed. Here, little mistress. It feels sun-tested now, warmer than any plum," and he reached the kitten out sitting on the palm of his right hand.

But Fafhrd had been forgetting the kitten's point of view. Its fur stood on end as it saw itself being carried toward the rats and now, as Hisvet stretched out her hand toward it, showing her upper teeth in a tiny smile and saying, "Poor little waif," the kitten hissed fiercely and raked out stiff armed with spread claws.

Hisvet drew back her hand with a gasp. Before Fafhrd could drop the kitten or bat it aside, it sprang to the top of his head and from there onto the highest point of the tiller.

The Mouser darted to Hisvet, crying meanwhile at Fafhrd, "Dolt! Lout! You knew the beast was half wild!" Then, to Hisvet, "Demoiselle! Are you hurt?"

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Fafhrd struck angrily at the kitten and one of the helmsmen came back to bat at it too, perhaps because he thought it improper for kittens to walk on the tiller. The kitten made a long leap to the starboard rail, slipped over it, and dangled by two claws above the curving water.

Hisvet was holding her hand away from the Mouser and he was saying, "Better let me examine it, Demoiselle. Even the slightest scratch from a filthy ship's cat can be dangerous," and she was saying, almost playfully, "No, Dirksman, I tell you it's nothing."

Fafhrd strode to the starboard rail, fully intending to flick the kitten overboard, but somehow when he came to do it he found he had instead cupped the kitten's rear in his hand and lifted it back on the rail. The kitten instantly sank its teeth deeply in the root of his thumb and fled up the aftermast. Fafhrd with difficulty suppressed a great yowl. Slinoor laughed.

"Nevertheless, I will examine it," the Mouser said masterfully and took Hisvet's hand by force. She let him hold it for a moment, then snatched it back and drawing herself up said frostily, "Dirksman, you forget yourself. Not even her own physician touches a demoiselle of Lankhmar, he touches only the body of her maid, on which the demoiselle points out her pains and symptoms. Leave me, Dirksman."

THE Mouser stood huffily back against the taffrail. Fafhrd sucked the root of his thumb. Hisvet went and stood beside the Mouser. Without looking at him, she said softly, "You should have asked me to call my maid. She's quite pretty."

Only a fingernail clipping of red sun was left on the horizon. Slinoor addressed the crow's nest: "What of the black sail, boy?"

"She holds her distance, master," the cry came back. "She courses on abreast of us."

The sun went under with a faint green flash. Hisvet bent her head sideways and kissed the Mouser on the neck, just under the ear. Her tongue tickled.

"Now I lose her, master," the crow's nest called. "There's mist to the northwest. And to the northeast . . . a small black cloud . . . like a black ship specked with light . . . that moves through the air. And now that fades too. All gone, master."

Hisvet straightened her head. Slinoor came toward them muttering, "The crow's nest sees too much." Hisvet shivered and said, "The White Shadows will take a chill. They're delicate, Dirksman." The Mouser breathed, "You are Ecstacy's White Shadow, Demoiselle," then strolled to-

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ward the silver cages, saying loudly for Slinoor's benefit, "Might we not be privileged to have a show of them, Demoiselle, tomorrow here on the afterdeck? 'Twould be wondrous instructive to watch you control them." He caressed the air over the cages and said, lying mightily, "My, they're fine handsome fellows." Actually he was peering apprehensively for any of the little spears and swords Slinoor had mentioned. The twelve rats looked up at him incuriously. One even seemed to yawn.

Slinoor said curtly, "I would advise against it, Demoiselle. The sailors have a mad fear and hatred of all rats. 'Twere best not to arouse it."

"But these are aristos," the Mouser objected, while Hisvet only repeated, "They'll take a chill."

Fafhrd, hearing this, took his hand out of his mouth and came hurrying to Hisvet, saying, "Little Mistress, may I carry them below? I'll be gentle as a Kleshite nurse." He lifted between thumb and third finger a cage with two rats in it. Hisvet rewarded him with a smile, saying, "I wish you would, gallant Swordsman. The common sailors handle them too roughly. But two cages are all you may safely carry. You'll need proper help." She gazed at the Mouser and Slinoor.

So Slinoor and the Mouser, the latter much to his distaste and apprehension, must each gingerly take up a silver cage, and Fafhrd two, and follow Hisvet to her cabin below the afterdeck. The Mouser could not forbear whispering privily to Fafhrd, "Oaf! To make rat-grooms of us! May you get rat-bites to match your cat-bite!" At the cabin door Hisvet's dark maid Frix received the cages, Hisvet thanked her three gallants most briefly and distantly and Frix closed the door against them. There was the muffled thud of a bar dropping across it and the jangle of a chain locking down the bar.

DARKNESS grew on the waters. A yellow lantern was lit and hoisted to the crow's nest. The black war galley *Shark,* its brown sail temporarily furled, came rowing back to fuss at *Clam,* next ahead of *Squid* in line, for being slow in getting up its masthead light, then dropped back by *Squid* while Lukeen and Slinoor exchanged shouts about a black sail and mist and ship-shaped small black clouds and the Dragon Rocks. Finally the galley went bustling ahead again with its Lankhmarines in browned-iron chain mail to take up its sailing station at the head of the column. The first stars twinkled, proof that the sun had not deserted through the waters of eternity to some other world

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bubble, but was swimming as he should back to the east under the ocean of the sky, errants rays from him lighting the floating star-jewels in his passage.

After moonrise that night Fafhrd and the Mouser each found private occasion to go rapping at Hisvet's door, but neither profited greatly thereby. At Fafhrd's knock Hisvet herself opened the small grille set in the larger door, said swiftly, "Fie, for shame, Swordsman! Can't you see I'm undressing?" and closed it instantly. While when the Mouser asked softly for a moment with "Ecstacy's White Shadow," the merry face of the dark maid Frix appeared at the grille, saying, "My mistress bid me kiss my hand good night to you." Which she did and closed the grille.

Fafhrd, who had been spying, greeted the crestfallen Mouser with a sardonic, "Ecstacy's White Shadow!"

"Little Mistress!" the Mouser retorted scathingly.

"Black Plum of Sarheenmar!"

"Kleshite Nurse!"

Neither hero slept restfully that night and two-thirds through it the *Squid's* gong began to sound at intervals, with the other ships' gongs replying or calling faintly. When at dawn's first blink the two came on deck, *Squid* was creeping through fog that hid the sail top. The two helmsmen were peering about jumpily, as if they expected to see ghosts. The sails hung slackly. Slinoor, his eyes dark-circled by fatigue and big with anxiety, explained tersely that the fog had not only slowed but disordered the grain fleet.

"That's *Tunny* next ahead of us, I can tell by her gong note. And beyond *Tunny, Carp.* Where's *Clam*? What's *Shark* about? And still not certainly past the Dragon Rocks! Not that I want to see 'em!"

"Do not some captains call them the Rat Rocks?" Fafhrd interposed. "From a rat colony started there from a wreck?"

"Aye," Slinoor allowed and then grinning sourly at the Mouser, observed, "Not the best day for a rat show on the after deck, is it? Which is some good from this fog. I can't abide the lolling white brutes. Though but a dozen in number they remind me too much of the Thirteen. Have you ever heard tell of the legend of the Thirteen?"

"I have," Fafhrd said somberly. "A wise woman of the Cold Waste once told me that for each animal kind—wolves, bats, whales, it holds for all and each—there are always thirteen individuals having almost manlike (or demonlike!) wisdom and skill. Can you but find and master this inner circle, the Wise Woman said, then through them

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you can control all animals of that kind."

Slinoor looked narrowly at Fafhrd and said, "She was not an altogether stupid woman."

The Mouser wondered if for men also there was an inner circle of Thirteen.

The black kitten came ghosting along the deck out of the fog forward. It made toward Fafhrd with an eager mew, then hesitated, studying him dubiously.

"Take for example, cats," Fafhrd said with a grin. "Somewhere in Nehwon today, mayhap scattered but more likely banded together, are thirteen cats of superfeline sagacity, somehow sensing and controlling the destiny of all catkind."

"What's this one sensing now?" Slinoor demanded softly.

The black kitten was staring to larboard, sniffing. Suddenly its scrawny body stiffened, the hair rising along its back and its skimpy tail a-bush.

"HOONGK!"

Slinoor turned to Fafhrd with a curse, only to see the Northerner staring about shut-mouthed and startled.

OUT of the fog to larboard came a green serpent's head big as a horse's, with white dagger teeth fencing red mouth horrendously a-gape. With dreadful swiftness it lunged low past Fafhrd on its endless yellow neck, its lower jaw loudly scraping the deck, and the white daggers clashed on the black kitten.

Or rather, on where the kitten had just been. For the latter seemed not so much to leap as to lift itself, by its tail perhaps, onto the starboard rail and thence vanished into the fog at the top of the aftermast in at most three more bounds.

The helmsmen raced each other forward. Slinoor and the Mouser threw themselves against the starboard taffrail, the unmanned tiller swinging slowly above them affording some sense of protection against the monster, which now lifted its nightmare head and swayed it this way and that, each time avoiding Fafhrd by inches. Apparently it was searching for the black kitten or more like it.

Fafhrd stood frozen, at first by sheer shock, then by the thought that whatever part of him moved first would get snapped off.

Nevertheless he was about to jump for it—besides all else the monster's mere stench was horrible—when a second green dragon's head, four times as big as the first with teeth like scimitars, came looming out of the fog. Sitting commandingly atop this second head was a man dressed in orange and purple, like a herald of the Eastern Lands, with red boots, cape and helmet, the

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last with a blue window in it, seemingly of opaque glass.

There is a point of grotesquerie beyond which horror cannot go, but slips into delirium. Fafhrd had reached that point. He began to feel as if he were in an opium dream. Everything was unquestionably real, yet it had lost its power to horrify him acutely.

He noticed as the merest of quaint details that the two greenish yellow necks forked from a common trunk.

Besides, the gaudily garbed man or demon riding the larger head seemed very sure of himself, which might or might not be a good thing. Just now he was belaboring the smaller head, seemingly in rebuke, with a blunt-pointed, blunt-hooked pike he carried, and roaring out, either under or through his blue red helmet, a gibberish that might be rendered as:

*"Gottverdammter Ungeheuer!"**

The smaller head cringed away, whimpering like seventeen puppies. The man-demon whipped out a small book of pages and after consulting it twice (apparently he could see *out* through his blue window) called down in broken, outlandishly accented Lankhmarese, "What world is this, friend?"

Fafhrd had never before in his life heard that question asked, even by an awakening brandy guzzler. Nevertheless in his opium-dream mood he answered easily enough, "The world of Nehwon, oh sorcerer!"

"Gott sei dank!"† the man-demon gibbered.

Fafhrd asked, "What world do *you* hail from?"

This question seemed to confound the man-demon. Hurriedly consulting his book, he replied, "Do you know about other worlds? Don't you believe the stars are only huge jewels?"

Fafhrd responded, "Any fool can see that the lights in the sky are jewels, but we are not simpletons, we know of other worlds. The Lankhmarts think they're bubbles in infinite waters. *I* believe we live in the jewel-ceilinged skull of a dead god. But doubtless there are other such skulls, the universe of universes being a great frosty battlefield."

The tiller, swinging as *Squid* wallowed with sail a-flap, bumped the lesser head, which twisted around and snapped at it, then shook splinters from its teeth.

"Tell the sorcerer to keep it off!" Slinoor shouted, cringing.

AFTER more hurried page-flipping the man-demon called down, "Don't worry, the monster seems to eat only rats. I captured

*"Goddam monster!" German is a language completely unknown in Nehwon.
†"Thank God!"

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it by a small rocky island where many rats live. It mistook your small black ship's cat for a rat."

Still in his mood of opium-lucidity, Fafhrd called up, "Oh sorcerer, do you plan to conjure the monster to your own skull-world, or world-bubble?"

This question seemed doubly to confound and excite the man-demon. He appeared to think Fafhrd must be a mind-reader. With much frantic book-consulting, he explained that he came from a world called simply Tomorrow and that he was visiting many worlds to collect monsters for some sort of museum or zoo, which he called in his gibberish *Hagenbeck's Zeitgarten.** On this particular expedition he had been seeking a monster that would be a reasonable facsimile of a wholly mythical six-headed sea-monster that devoured men off the decks of ships and was called Scylla by an ancient fantasy writer named Homer.

"There never was a Lankhmar poet named Homer," muttered Slinoor, who seemed to have none too clear an idea of what was going on.

"Doubtless he was a scribe of Quarmall or the Eastern Lands," the Mouser told Slinoor reassuringly. Then, grown less fearful of the two heads and somewhat jealous of Fafhrd holding the center of the stage, the Mouser leapt a-top the taffrail and cried, "Oh sorcerer, with what spells will you conjure your Little Scylla back to, or perhaps I should say ahead to your Tomorrow bubble? I myself know somewhat of witchcraft. Desist, vermin!" (This last remark was directed with a gesture of lordly contempt toward the lesser head, which came questing curiously toward the Mouser. Slinoor gripped the Mouser's ankle.)

The man-demon reacted to the Mouser's question by slapping himself on the side of his red helmet, as though he'd forgotten something most important. He hurriedly began to explain that he traveled between worlds in a ship (or space-time engine, whatever that might mean) that tended to float just above the water —"a black ship with little lights and masts"—and that the ship had floated away from him in another fog a day ago while he'd been absorbed in taming the newly captured sea-monster. Since then the man-demon, mounted on his now-docile monster, had been fruitlessly searching for his lost vehicle.

The description awakened a memory in Slinoor, who managed to nerve himself to explain audibly that last sunset *Squid*'s crow's nest had sighted just such a ship floating or flying to the northeast.

*Literally, in German, "Hagenbeck's Time-garden," apparently derived from *Tiergarten*, which means animal-garden, or zoo.

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The man-demon was voluble in his thanks and after questioning Slinoor closely announced (rather to everyone's relief) that he was now ready to turn his search eastward with new hope.

"Probably I will never have the opportunity to repay your courtesies," he said in parting. "But as you drift through the waters of eternity at least carry with you my name: Karl Treuherz of Hagenbeck's."

Hisvet, who had been listening from the middeck, chose that moment to climb the short ladder that led up to the afterdeck. She was wearing an ermine smock and hood against the chilly fog.

As her silvery hair and pale lovely features rose above the level of the afterdeck, the smaller dragon's head, which had been withdrawing decorously, darted at her with the speed of a serpent striking. Hisvet dropped. Woodwork rended loudly.

Backing off into the fog atop the larger and rather benign-eyed head, Karl Treuherz gibbered as never before and belabored the lesser head mercilessly as it withdrew.

Then the two-headed monster with its orange-and-purple mahout could be dimly seen moving around *Squid*'s stern eastward into thicker fog, the man-demon gibbering gentlier what might have been an excuse and fare well: "*Es tut mir sehr leid! Aber dankeschoen, dankeschoen!*"* With a last gentle "Hoongk!" the man-demon dragon-dragon assemblage faded into the fog.

FAFHRD and the Mouser raced a tie to Hisvet's side, vaulting down over the splintered rail, only to have her scornfully reject their solicitude as she lifted herself from the oaken middeck, delicately rubbing her hip and limping for a step or two.

"Come not near me, Spoonmen," she said bitterly. "Shame it is when a demoiselle must save herself from toothy perdition only by falling helter-skelter on that part of her which I would almost shame to show you on Frix. You are no gentle knights, else dragons' heads had littered the afterdeck. Fie, fie!"

Meanwhile patches of clear sky and water began to show to the west and the wind to freshen from the same quarter. Slinoor dashed forward, bawling for his bosun to chase the monster-scared sailors up from the forecastle before *Squid* did herself an injury.

Although there was yet little real danger of that, the Mouser stood by the tiller, Fafhrd looked to the mainsheet. Then Slinoor, hurrying back aft followed by a few pale sailors, sprang to the taffrail with a cry.

*It was! "I am so very sorry! But thank you, thank you so nicely!"

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The fogbank was slowly rolling eastward. Clear water stretched to the western horizon. Two bowshots north of *Squid*, four other ships were emerging in a disordered cluster from the white wall: the war galley *Shark* and the grain ships *Tunny*, *Carp* and *Grouper*. The galley, moving rapidly under oars, was headed toward *Squid*.

But Slinoor was staring south. There, a scant bowshot away, were two ships, the one standing clear of the fogbank, the other half hid in it.

The one in the clear was *Clam*, about to sink by the head, its gunwales awash. Its mainsail, somehow carried away, trailed brownly in the water. The empty deck was weirdly arched upward.

The fog-shrouded ship appeared to be a black cutter with a black sail.

Between the two ships, from *Clam* toward the cutter, moved a multitude of tiny, dark-headed ripples.

Fafhrd joined Slinoor. Without looking away, the latter said simply, "Rats!" Fafhrd's eyebrows rose.

The Mouser joined them, saying, "*Clam*'s holed. The water swells the grain, which mightily forces up the deck."

Slinoor nodded and pointed toward the cutter. It was possible dimly to see tiny dark forms—rats surely!—climbing over its side from out of the water. "There's what gnawed holes in *Clam*," Slinoor said.

Then Slinoor pointed between the ships, near the cutter. Among the last of the ripple-army was a white-headed one. A little later a small white form could be seen swiftly mounting the cutter's side. Slinoor said, "There's what commanded the hole-gnawers."

With a dull splintering rumble the arched deck of *Clam* burst upward, spewing brown.

"The grain!" Slinoor cried hollowly.

"Now you know what tears ships," the Mouser said.

The black cutter grew ghostlier, moving west now into the retreating fog.

The galley *Shark* went boiling past *Squid*'s stern, its oars moving like the legs of a leaping centipede. Lukeen shouted up, "Here's foul trickery! *Clam* was lured off in the night!"

The black cutter, winning its race with the eastward-rolling fog, vanished in whiteness.

The split-decked *Clam* nosed under with hardly a ripple and angled down into the black and salty depths, dragged by its leaden keel.

With war trumpet skirling, *Shark* drove into the white wall after the cutter.

Clam's masthead, cutting a little furrow in the swell, went under. All that was to be seen now

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on the waters south of *Squid* was a great spreading stain of tawny grain.

Slinoor turned brim-faced to his mate. "Enter the Demoiselle Hisvet's cabin, by force if need be," he commanded. "Count her white rats!"

Fafhrd and the Mouser looked at each other.

THREE hours later the same four persons were assembled in Hisvet's cabin with the Demoiselle, Frix, and Lukeen.

The cabin, low-ceilinged enough so that Fafhrd, Lukeen and the mate must move bent and tended to sit hunch-shouldered, was spacious for a grain ship, yet crowded by this company together with the caged rats and Hisvet's perfumed, silver-bound baggage piled on Slinoor's dark furniture and locked sea chests.

Three horn windows to the stern and louver slits to starboard and larboard let in a muted light.

Slinoor and Lukeen sat against the horn windows, behind a narrow table. Fafhrd occupied a cleared sea chest, the Mouser an upended cask. Between them were racked the four rat cages, whose white-furred occupants seemed as quietly intent on the proceedings as any of the men. The Mouser amused himself by imagining what it would be like if the white rats were trying the men instead of the other way round. A row of blue-eyed white rats would make most formidable judges, already robed in ermine. He pictured them staring down mercilessly from very high seats at a tiny cringing Lukeen and Slinoor, round whom scuttled mouse pages and mouse clerks and behind whom stood rat pikemen in half armor holding fantastically barbed and curvy-bladed weapons.

The mate stood stooping by the open grille of the closed door, in part to see that no other sailors eavesdropped.

The Demoiselle Hisvet sat cross-legged on the swung-down sea-bed, her ermine smock decorously tucked under her knees, managing to look most distant and courtly even in this attitude. Now and again her right hand played with the dark wavy hair of Frix, who crouched on the deck at her knees.

Timbers creaked as *Squid* bowled north. Now and then the bare feet of the helmsmen could be heard faintly slithering on the afterdeck overhead. Around the small trapdoor-like hatches leading below and through the very crevices of the planking came the astringent, toastlike, all-pervasive odor of the grain.

Lukeen spoke. He was a lean, slant-shouldered, cordily muscled man almost as big as Fafhrd. His

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short coat of browned-iron mail over his simple black tunic was of the finest links. A golden band confined his dark hair and bound to his forehead the browned-iron five-pointed curvy-edged starfish emblem of Lankhmar.

"How do I know *Clam* was lured away? Two hours before dawn I twice thought I heard *Shark*'s own gong-note in the distance, although I stood then beside *Shark's* muffled gong. Three of my crew heard it too. 'Twas most eerie. Gentlemen, I know the gong-notes of Lankhmar war galleys and merchantmen better than I know my children's voices. This that we heard was so like *Shark*'s I never dreamed it might be that of another ship—I deemed it some ominous ghost-echo or trick of our minds and I thought no more about it as a matter for action. If I had only had the faintest suspicion . . ."

Lukeen scowled bitterly, shaking his head, and continued, "Now I know the black cutter must carry a gong shaped to duplicate *Shark*'s note precisely. They used it, likely with someone mimicking my voice, to draw *Clam* out of line in the fog and get her far enough off so that the rat horde, officered by the white one, could work its will on her without the crew's screams being heard. They must have gnawed twenty holes in her bottom for *Clam* to take on water so fast and the grain to swell so. Oh, they're far shrewder and more persevering than men, the little spade toothed fiends!"

"MIDSEA madness!" Fafhrd snorted in interruption. "Rats make men scream? And do away with them? Rats seize a ship and sink it? Rats officered and accepting discipline? Why this is the rankest superstition!"

"You're a fine one to talk of superstition and the impossible, Fafhrd," Slinoor shot at him, "when only this morning you talked with a masked and gibbering demon who rode a two-headed dragon."

Lukeen lifted his eyebrows at Slinoor. This was the first he'd heard of the Hagenbeck episode.

Fafhrd said, "That was travel between worlds. Another matter altogether. No superstition in it."

Slinoor responded skeptically. "I suppose there was no superstition in it either when you told me what you'd heard from the Wise Woman about the Thirteen?"

Fafhrd laughed. "Why, I never believed one word the Wise Woman ever told me. She was a witchery old fool. I recounted her nonsense merely as a curiosity."

Slinoor eyed Fafhrd with slit-eyed incredulity, then said to Lukeen, "Continue."

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"There's little more to tell," the latter said. "I saw the rat-battalions swimming from *Clam* to the black cutter. I saw, as you did, their white officer." This with a glare at Fafhrd. "Thereafter I fruitlessly hunted the black cutter two hours in the fog until cramp took my rowers. If I'd found her, I'd not boarded her but thrown fire into her! Aye, and stood off the rats with burning oil on the waters if they tried again to change ships! Aye, and laughed as the furred murderers fried!"

"Just so," Slinoor said with finality. "And what, in your judgment, Commander Lukeen, should we do now?"

"Sink the white arch-fiends in their cages," Lukeen answered instantly, "before they officer the rape of more ships, or our sailors go mad with fear."

This brought an instant icy retort from Hisvet. "You'll have to sink me first, silver-weighted, oh Commander!"

Lukeen's gaze moved past her to a scatter of big-eared silver unguent jars and several looped heavy silver chains on a shelf by the bed. "That too is not impossible, Demoiselle," he said, smiling hardly.

"There's not one shred of proof against her!" Fafhrd exploded. "Little mistress, the man is mad."

"No proof?" Lukeen roared. "There were twelve white rats yesterday. Now there are eleven." He waved a hand at the stacked cages and their blue-eyed haughty occupants. "You've all counted them. Who else but this devilish demoiselle sent the white officer to direct the sharp-toothed gnawers and killers that destroyed *Clam*? What more proof do you want?"

"Yes, indeed!" the Mouser interjected in a high vibrant voice that commanded attention. "There is proof aplenty . . . *if* there were twelve rats in the four cages yesterday." Then he added casually but very clearly, "It is my recollection that there were eleven."

Slinoor stared at the Mouser as though he couldn't believe his ears. "You lie!" he said. "What's more, you lie senselessly. Why, you and Fafhrd and I all spoke of there being twelve white rats!"

The Mouser shook his head. "Fafhrd and I said no word about the exact number of rats. *You* said there were a dozen," he informed Slinoor. "Not twelve, but . . . a dozen. I assumed you were using the expression as a round number, an approximation." The Mouser snapped his fingers. "Now I remember that when you said a dozen I became idly curious and counted the rats. And got eleven. But it seemed to me too trifling a matter to dispute."

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"No, there were twelve rats yesterday," Slinoor asserted solemnly and with great conviction. "You're mistaken, Gray Mouser."

"I'll believe my friend Slinoor before a dozen of you, "Lukeen put in.

"True, friends should stick together," the Mouser said with an approving smile. "Yesterday I counted Glipkerio's gift-rats and got eleven. Ship's Master Slinoor, any man may be mistaken in his recollections from time to time. Let's analyze this. Twelve white rats divided by four silver cages equals three to a cage. Now let me see . . . I have it! There was a time yesterday when between us, we surely counted the rats—when we carried them down to this cabin. How many were in the cage you carried, Slinoor?"

"Three," the latter said instantly.

"And three in mine," the Mouser said.

"And three in each of the other two," Lukeen put in impatiently. "We waste time!"

"We certainly do," Slinoor agreed strongly, nodding.

"Wait!" said the Mouser, lifting a point-fingered hand. "There was a moment when all of us must have noticed how many rats there were in one of the cages Fafhrd carried—when he first lifted it up, speaking the while to Hisvet. Visualize it. He lifted it like this." The Mouser touched his thumb to his third finger. "How many rats were in that cage, Slinoor?"

Slinoor frowned deeply. "Two," he said, adding instantly, "and four in the other."

"You said three in each just now," the Mouser reminded him.

"I did not!" Slinoor denied. "Lukeen said that, not I."

"Yes, but you nodded, agreeing with him," the Mouser said, his raised eyebrows the very emblem of innocent truth-seeking.

"I agreed with him only that we wasted time," Slinoor said. "And we do." Just the same a little of the frown lingered between his eyes and his voice had lost its edge of utter certainty.

"I see," the Mouser said doubtfully. By stages he had begun to play the part of an attorney elucidating a case in court, striding about and frowning most professionally. Now he shot a sudden question: "Fafhrd, how many rats did you carry?"

"Five," boldly answered the Northerner, whose mathematics were not of the sharpest, but who'd had plenty time to count surreptitiously on his fingers and to think about what the Mouser was up to. "Two in one cage, three in the other."

"A feeble falsehood!" Lukeen scoffed. "The base barbarian would swear to anything to win a smile from the Demoiselle, who has him fawning."

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"That's a foul lie!" Fafhrd roared, springing up and fetching his head such a great hollow thump on a deck beam that he clapped both hands to it and crouched in dizzy agony.

SIT down, Fafhrd, before I ask you to apologize to the roof!" the Mouser commanded with heartless harshness. "This is solemn civilized court, no barbarous brawling session! Let's see—three and three and five make . . . eleven. Demoiselle Hisvet!" He pointed an accusing finger straight between her red-irised eyes and demanded most sternly, "How many white rats did you bring aboard *Squid*? The truth now and nothing but the truth!"

"Eleven," she answered demurely. "La, but I'm joyed someone at last had the wit to ask me."

"That I know's not true!" Slinoor said abruptly, his brow once more clear. "Why didn't I think of it before?—'twould have saved us all this bother of questions and counting. I have in this very cabin Glipkerio's letter of commission to me. In it he speaks verbatim of entrusting to me the Demoiselle Hisvet, daughter of Hisvin, and twelve witty white rats. Wait, I'll get it out and prove it to your faces!"

"No need, Ship's-Master," Hisvet interposed. "I saw the letter writ and can testify to the perfect truth of your quotation. But most sadly, between the sending of the letter and my boarding of *Squid*, poor Tchy was gobbled up by Glippy's giant boarhound Bimbat." She touched a slim finger to the corner of her eye and sniffed. "Poor Tchy, he was the most winsome of the twelve. 'Twas why I kept to my cabin the first two days." Each time she spoke the name Tchy, the eleven caged rats chittered mournfully.

"Is it Glippy you call our overlord?" Slinoor ejaculated, genuinely shocked. "Oh shameless one!"

"Aye, watch your language, Demoiselle," the Mouser warned severely, maintaining to the hilt his new role of austere inquisitor. "The familiar relationship between you and our overlord the arch-noble Glipkerio Kistomerces does not come within the province of this court."

"She lies like a shrewd subtle witch!" Lukeen asserted angrily. "Thumbscrew or rack, or perchance just a pale arm twisted high behind her back would get the truth from her fast enough!"

Hisvet turned and looked at him proudly. "I accept your challenge, Commander," she said evenly, laying her right hand on her maid's dark head. "Frix, reach out your naked hand, or whatever other part of you the brave gentleman wishes to tor-

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ture." The dark maid straightened her back, Her face was impassive, lips firmly pressed together, though her eyes searched around wildly. Hisvet continued to Slinoor and Lukeen, "If you know any Lankhmar law at all, you know that a virgin of the rank of demoiselle is tortured only in the person of her maid, who proves by her steadfastness under extreme pain the innocence of her mistress."

"What did I tell you about her?" Lukeen demanded of them all. "Subtle is too gross a term for her spiderwebby sleights!" He glared at Hisvet and said scornfully, his mouth a-twist, "Virgin!"

Hisvet smiled with cold long-suffering. Fafhrd flushed and although still holding his battered head, barely refrained from leaping up again. Lukeen looked at him with amusement, secure in his knowledge that he could bait Fafhrd at will and that the barbarian lacked the civilized wit to insult him deeply in return.

FAFHRD stared thoughtfully at Lukeen from under his capping hands. Then he said, "Yes, you're brave enough in armor, with your threats against girls and your hot imaginings of torture, but if you were without armor and had to prove your manhood with just one brave girl alone, you'd fail like a worm!"

Lukeen shot up enraged and got himself such a clout from a deck beam that he squeaked shudderingly and swayed. Nevertheless he gripped blindly for his sword at his side. Slinoor grasped that wrist and pulled him down into his seat.

"Govern yourself, Commander," Slinoor implored sternly, seeming to grow in resolution as the rest quarreled and quibbled. "Fafhrd, no more dagger words. Gray Mouser, this is not your court but mine and we are not met to split the hairs of high law but to meet a present peril. Here and now this grain fleet is in grave danger. Our very lives are risked. Much more than that, Lankhmar's in danger if Movarl gets not his gift-grain at this third sending. Last night *Clam* was foully murdered. Tonight it may be *Grouper* or *Squid, Shark* even, or no less than all our ships. The first two fleets went warned and well guarded, yet suffered only total perdition."

He paused to let that sink in. Then, "Mouser, you've roused some small doubts in my mind by your eleven-twelving. But small doubts are nothing where home lives and home cities are in peril. For the safety of the fleet and of Lankhmar we'll sink the white rats forthwith and keep close watch on the Demoiselle Hisvet to the very docks of Kvarch Nar."

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"Right!" the Mouser cried approvingly, getting in ahead of Hisvet. But then he instantly added, with the air of sudden brilliant inspiration, "*Or* . . . better yet . . . appoint Fafhrd and myself to keep unending watch not only on Hisvet but also on the eleven white rats. That way we don't spoil Glipkerio's gift and risk offending Movarl."

"I'd trust no one's mere watching of the rats. They're too tricksy," Slinoor informed him. "The Demoiselle I intend to put on *Shark*, where she'll be more closely guarded. The grain is what Movarl wants, not the rats. He doesn't know about them, so can't be angered at not getting them."

"But he does know about them," Hisvet interjected. "Glipkerio and Movarl exchange weekly letters by albatross-post. La, but Nehwon grows smaller each year, Ship's Master—ships are snails compared to the great winging mail-birds. Glipkerio wrote of the rats to Movarl, who expressed great delight at the prospective gift and intense anticipation of watching the White Shadows perform. Along with myself," she added, demurely bending her head.

"Also," the Mouser put in rapidly, "I must firmly oppose—most regretfully, Slinoor—the transfer of Hisvet to another ship. Fafhrd's and my commission from Glipkerio, which I can produce at any time, states in clearest words that we are to attend the Demoiselle at all times outside her private quarters. He makes us wholly responsible for her safety—and also for that of the White Shadows, which creatures our overlord states, again in clearest writing, that he prizes beyond their weight in jewels."

"You can attend her in *Shark*," Slinoor told the Mouser curtly.

"I'll not have the barbarian on my ship!" Lukeen rasped, still squinting from the pain of his clout.

"I'd scorn to board such a tricked-out rowboat or oar-worm," Fafhrd shot back at him, voicing the common barbarian contempt for galleys.

"*Also*," the Mouser cut in again, loudly, with an admonitory gesture at Fafhrd, "It is my duty as a friend to warn you, Slinoor, that in your reckless threats against the White Shadows and the Demoiselle herself, you risk incurring the heaviest displeasure not only of our overlord but also of the most powerful grain merchant in Lankhmar."

Slinoor answered most simply, "I think only of the City and the grain fleet. You know that," but Lukeen, fuming, spat out a "Hah!" and said scornfully, "the Gray Fool has not grasped that it is Hisvet's very father Hisvin

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who is behind the rat-sinkings, since he thereby grows rich with the extra nation's-ransoms of grain he sells Glipkerio!"

"Quiet, Lukeen!" Slinoor commanded apprehensively. "This dubious guess-work of yours has no place here."

"Guesswork? Mine?" Lukeen exploded. "It was *your* suggestion, Slinoor—Yes, and that Hisvin plots Glipkerio's overthrow—Aye, and even that he's in league with the Mingols! Let's speak truth for once!"

"Then speak it for yourself alone, Commander," Slinoor said most sober-sharply. "I fear the blow's disordered your brain. Gray Mouser, you're a man of sense," he appealed. "Can you not understand my one overriding concern? We're alone with mass murder on the high seas. We must take measures against it. Oh, will none of you show some simple wit?"

"La, and I will, Ship's-Master, since you ask it," Hisvet said brightly, rising to her knees on the sea-bed as she turned toward Slinoor. Sunlight striking through a louver shimmered on her silver hair and gleamed from the silver ring confining it. "I'm but a girl, unused to problems of war and rapine, yet I have an all-explaining simple thought that I have waited in vain to hear voiced by one of you gentlemen, wise in the ways of violence.

"Last night a ship was slain. You hang the crime on rats—small beasties which would leave a sinking ship in any case, which often have a few whites among them, and which only by the wildest stretch of imagination are picturable as killing an entire crew and vanishing their bodies. To fill the great gaps in this weird theory you make me a sinister rat-queen, who can work black miracles, and now even, it seems, create my poor doting daddy an all-powerful rat-emperor.

"Yet this morning you met a ship's murderer if there ever was one and let him go honking off unchallenged. La, but the man-demon even confessed he'd been seeking a multi-headed monster that would snatch living men from a ship's deck and devour them. Surely he lied when he said his this-world foundling ate small fry only, for it struck at me to devour me—and might earlier have snapped up any of you, except it was sated!

"For what is more likely than that the two-head long-neck dragon ate all *Clam*'s sailors off her deck, snaking them out of the forecastle and hold, if they fled there, like sweetmeats from a compartmented comfit-box, and then scratched holes in *Clam*'s planking? Or perhaps more likely still, that *Clam* tore out her bottom on the Dragon Rocks in

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the fog and at the same time met the sea-dragon? These are sober possibilities, gentlemen, apparent even to a soft girl and asking no mind-stretch at all."

This startling speech brought forth an excited medly of reactions. Simultaneously the Mouser applauded, "A gem of princess-wit, Demoiselle, oh you'd make a rare strategist;" Fafhrd said stoutly, "Most lucid, Little Mistress, yet Karl Treuherz seemed to me an honest demon;" Frix told them proudly, "My mistress outthinks you all;" the mate at the door goggled at Hisvet and made the sign of the starfish; Lukeen snarled, "She conveniently forgets the black cutter;" while Slinoor cried them all down with, "Rat-queen you say jestingly? Rat-queen you are!"

AS the others grew silent at that dire accusation, Slinoor, gazing grimly fearful at Hisvet, continued rapidly, "The Demoiselle has recalled to me by her speech the worst point against her. Karl Treuherz said his dragon, living by the Rat Rocks, ate only rats. It made no move to gobble us several men, though it had every chance, yet when Hisvet appeared it struck at her at once. It knew her true race."

Slinoor's voice went shudderingly low. "Thirteen rats with the minds of men rule the whole rat race. That's ancient wisdom from Lankhmar's wisest seers. Eleven are these silver-furred silent sharpies, hearing our every word. The twelfth celebrates in the black cutter his conquest of *Clam*. The thirteenth—" and he pointed finger "—is the silver-haired, red eyed Demoiselle herself!"

Lukeen slithered to his feet at that, crying, "Oh most shrewdly reasoned, Slinoor! And why does she wear such modest shrouding garb except to hide further evidence of the dread kinship? Let me but strip off that cloaking ermine smock and I'll show you a white furred body and ten small black dugs instead of proper maiden breasts!"

As he came snaking around the table toward Hisvet, Fafhrd sprang up, also cautiously, and pinned Lukeen's arms to his sides in a bear-hug, calling, "Nay, and you touch her, you die!"

Meantime Frix cried, "The dragon was sated with *Clam*'s crew, as my mistress told you. It wanted no more coarse-fibered men, but eagerly seized at my dainty-fleshed darling for a desert mouthful!"

Lukeen wrenched around until his black eyes glared into Fafhrd's green ones inches away. "Oh most foul barbarian!" he grated. "I forego rank and dignity and challenge you this instant to a bout of quarterstaves

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on middeck. I'll prove Hisvet's taint on you by trial of battle. That is, if you dare face civilized combat, you great stinking ape!" And he spat full in Fafhrd's taunting face.

Fafhrd's only reaction was to smile a great smile through the spittle running gummily down his cheek, while maintaining his grip of Lukeen and wary lookout for a bite at his own nose.

Thereafter, challenge having been given and accepted, there was naught for even the head-shaking, heaven-glancing Slinoor to do but hurry preparation for the combat or duel, so that it might be fought before sunset and leave some daylight for taking sober measures for the fleet's safety in the approaching dark of night.

As Slinoor, the Mouser and mate came around them, Fafhrd released Lukeen, who scornfully averting his gaze instantly went on deck to summon a squad of his marines from *Shark* to second him and see fair play. Slinoor conferred with his mate and other officers. The Mouser, after a word with Fafhrd, slipped forward and could be seen gossiping industriously with *Squid*'s bosun and the common members of her crew down to cook and cabin boy. Occasionally something might have passed rapidly from the Mouser's hand to that of the sailor with whom he spoke.

DESPITE Slinoor's urging, the sun was dropping down the western sky before *Squid*'s gongsman beat the rapid brassy tattoo that signalized the imminence of combat. The sky was clear to the west and overhead, but the sinister fogbank still rested a Lankhmar league (twenty bowshots) to the east, paralleling the northward course of the fleet and looking almost as solid and dazzling as a glacier wall in the sun's crosswise rays. Most mysteriously neither hot sun nor west wind dissipated it.

Black-suited, brown-mailed and brown-helmeted marines facing aft made a wall across *Squid* to either side of the mainmast. They held their spears horizontal and crosswise at arm's-length down, making an additional low fence. Black-tunicked sailors peered between their shoulders and boots, or sat with their own brown legs a-dangle on the larboard side of the foredeck, where the great sail did not cut off their view. A few perched in the rigging.

The damaged rail had been stripped away from the break in the afterdeck and there around the bare aftermast sat the three judges: Slinoor, the Mouser, and Lukeen's sergeant. Around them, mostly to larboard of the two helmsmen, were grouped *Squid*'s officers and certain officers of the other ship on whose presence the

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Mouser had stubbornly insisted, though it had meant time-consuming ferrying by ship's boat.

Hisvet and Frix were in the cabin with the door shut. The Demoiselle had wanted to watch the duel through the open door or even from the afterdeck, but Lukeen had protested that this would make it easier for her to work an evil spell on him, and the judges had ruled for Lukeen. However the grille was open and now and again the sun's rays twinkled on a peering eye or silvered fingernail.

Between the dark spear-wall of marines and the afterdeck stretched a great square of white oaken deck, empty save for the crane-fittings and like fixed gear and level except for the main hatch, which made a central square of deck a hand's span above the rest. Each corner of the larger square was marked off by a black-chalked quarter circle. Either contestant stepping inside a quarter circle after the duel began (or springing on the rail or grasping the rigging or falling over the side) would at once forfeit the match.

In the foreward larboard quarter circle stood Lukeen in black shirt and hose, still wearing his gold-banded starfish emblem. By him was his second, his own hawkfaced lieutenant. With his right hand Lukeen gripped his quarterstaff, a heavy wand of close-grained oak as tall as himself and thick as Hisvet's wrist. Raising it above his head he twirled it till it hummed, smiling fiendishly.

In the after starboard quarter circle, next the cabin door, were Fafhrd and his second, the mate of *Carp*, a grossly fat man with a touch of the Mingol in his sallow features. The Mouser could not be judge and second both, and he and Fafhrd had diced more than once with *Carp*'s mate in the old days at Lankmar—losing money to him, too, which at least indicated that he might be resourceful.

Fafhrd took from him now his own quarterstaff, gripping it cross-handed near one end. He made a few slow practice passes with it through the air, then handed it back to *Carp*'s mate and stripped off his jerkin.

Lukeen's marines sniggered to each other at the Northerner handling a quarterstaff as if it were a two-handed broadsword, but when Fafhrd bared his hairy chest *Squid*'s sailors set up a rousing cheer and when Lukeen commented loudly to his second, "What did I tell you? A great hairy-pelted ape, beyond question," and spun his staff again, the sailors booed him lustily.

"Strange," Slinoor commented in a low voice. "I had thought Lukeen to be popular among the sailors."

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Lukeen's sergeant looked around incredulously at that remark. The Mouser only shrugged. Slinoor continued to him, "If the sailors knew your comrade fought on the side of rats, they'd not cheer him." The Mouser only smiled.

The gong sounded again.

SLINOOR rose and spoke loudly: "A bout at quarterstaves with no breathing spells! Commander Lukeen seeks to prove on the Overlord's mercenary Fafhrd certain allegations against a demoiselle of Lankhmar. First man struck senseless or at mercy of his foe loses. Prepare!"

Two ship's boys went skipping across the middeck, scattering handfuls of white sand.

Sitting, Slinoor remarked to the Mouser, "A pox of this footling duel! It delays our action against Hisvet and the rats. Lukeen was a fool to bridle at the barbarian. Still, when he's drubbed him, there'll be time enough."

The Mouser lifted an eyebrow. Slinoor said lightly, "Oh didn't you know? Lukeen will win, that's certain," while the sergeant, nodding soberly, confirmed, "The Commander's a master of staves. 'Tis no game for barbarians."

The gong sounded a third time.

Lukeen sprang nimbly across the chalk and onto the hatch, crying, "Ho, hairy ape! Art ready to double-kiss the oak?—first my staff, then the deck?"

Fafhrd came shambling out, gripping his wand most awkwardly and responding, "Your spit has poisoned my left eye, Lukeen, but I see some civilized target with my right."

Lukeen dashed at him joyously then, feinting at elbow and head, then rapidly striking with the other end of his staff at Fafhrd's knee to tumble or lame him.

Fafhrd, abruptly switching to conventional stance and grip, parried the blow and swung a lightning riposte at Lukeen's jaw.

Lukeen got his staff up in time so that the blow hit only his cheek glancingly, but he was unsettled by it and thereafter Fafhrd was upon him, driving him back in a hail of barely-parried blows while the sailors cheered.

Slinoor and the sergeant gaped wide-eyed, but the Mouser only knotted his fingers, muttering, "Not so fast, Fafhrd."

Then, as Fafhrd prepared to end it all, he stumbled stepping off the hatch, which changed his swift blow to the head into a slow blow at the ankles. Lukeen leaped up so that Fafhrd's staff passed under his feet, and while he was still in the air rapped Fafhrd on the head.

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The sailors groaned. The marines cheered once, growlingly.

The unfooted blow was not of the heaviest, nonetheless it three-quarters stunned Fafhrd and now it was his turn to be driven back under a pelting shower of swipes. For several moments there was no sound but the rutch of soft-soled boots on sanded oak and the rapid dry musical *bong* of staff meeting staff.

When Fafhrd came suddenly to his full senses he was falling away from a wicked swing. A glimpse of black by his heel told him that his next inevitable backward step would carry him inside his own quarter circle.

Swift as thought he thrust far *behind* him with his staff. Its end struck deck, then stopped against the cabin wall, and Fafhrd heaved himself forward with it, away from the chalk line, ducking and lunging to the side to escape Lukeen's blows while his staff could not protect him.

The sailors screamed with excitement. The judges and officers on the afterdeck kneeled like dice-players, peering over the edge.

Fafhrd had to lift his left arm to guard his head. He took a blow on the elbow and his left arm dropped limp to his side. Thereafter he had to handle his staff like a broadsword indeed, swinging it one-handed in whistling parries and strokes.

Lukeen hung back, playing more cautiously now, knowing Fafhrd's one wrist must tire sooner than his two. He'd aim a few rapid blows at Fafhrd, then prance back.

Barely parrying the third of these attacks, Fafhrd riposted recklessly, not with a proper swinging blow, but simply gripping the end of his staff and lunging. The combined length of Fafhrd and his staff overtook Lukeen's retreat and the tip of Fafhrd's staff poked him low in the chest, just on the nerve spot.

Lukeen's jaw dropped, his mouth stayed open wide, and he wavered. Fafhrd smartly rapped his staff out of his fingers and as it clattered down, toppled Lukeen to the deck with a second almost casual prod.

THE sailors cheered themselves hoarse. The marines growled surlily and one cried, "Foul!" Lukeen's second knelt by him, glaring at Fafhrd. *Carp*'s mate danced a ponderous jig up to Fafhrd and wafted the wand out of his hands. On the afterdeck *Squid*'s officers were glum, though those of the other grain ships seemed strangely jubilant. The Mouser gripped Slinoor's elbow, urging, "Cry Fafhrd victor," while the sergeant frowned prodigiously, hand to temple, saying, "Well, there's nothing I know of in the *rules* . . ."

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At that moment the cabin door opened and Hisvet stepped out, wearing a long scarlet, scarlet-hooded silk robe.

The Mouser, sensing climax, sprang to starboard, where *Squid*'s gong hung, snatched the striker from the gongsman and clanged it wildly.

Squid grew silent. Then there were pointings and questioning cries as Hisvet was seen. She put a silver recorder to her lips and began to dance dreamily toward Fafhrd, softly whistling with her recorder a high haunting tune of seven notes in a minor key. From somewhere tiny tuned bells accompanied it tinklingly. Then Hisvet swung to one side, facing Fafhrd as she moved around him, and the questioning cries changed to ones of wonder and astonishment and the sailors came crowding as far aft as they could and swinging through the rigging, as the procession became visible that Hisvet headed.

It consisted of eleven white rats walking in single file on their hind legs and wearing little scarlet robes and caps. The first four carried in each forepaw clusters of tiny silver bells which they shook rythmically. The next five bore on their shoulders, hanging down between them a little, a double length of looped gleaming silver chain—they were very like five sailors lugging an anchor chain. The last two each bore slantwise a slim silver wand as tall as himself as he walked erect, tail curving high.

The first four halted side by side in rank facing Fafhrd and tinkling their bells to Hisvet's piping.

The next five marched on steadily to Fafhrd's right foot. There their leader paused, looked up at Fafhrd's face with upraised paw, and squeaked three times. Then, gripping his end of the chain in one paw, he used his other three to climb Fafhrd's boot. Imitated by his four fellows, he then carefully climbed Fafhrd's trousers and hairy chest.

FAFHRD stared down at the mounting chain and scarlet-robed rats without moving a muscle, except to frown faintly as tiny paws unavoidably tweaked clumps of his chest-hair.

The first rat mounted to Fafhrd's right shoulder and moved behind his back to his left shoulder, the four other rats following in order and never letting slip the chain.

When all five rats were standing on Fafhrd's shoulders, they lifted one strand of the silver chain and brought it forward over his head, most dexterously. Meanwhile he was looking straight ahead at Hisvet, who

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had completely circled him and now stood piping behind the bell-tinklers.

The five rats dropped the strand, so that the chain hung in a gleaming oval down Fafhrd's chest. At the same instant each rat lifted his scarlet cap as high above his head as his foreleg would reach.

Someone cried, "Victor!"

The five rats swung down their caps and again lifted them high, and as if from one throat all the sailors and most of the marines and officers cried in a great shout: "VICTOR!"

The five rats led two more cheers for Fafhrd, the men aboard *Squid* obeying as if hypnotized—though whether by some magic power or simply by the wonder and appropriatenes of the rats' behavior, it was hard to tell.

Hisvet finished her piping with a merry flourish and the two rats with silver wands scurried up onto the afterdeck and standing at the foot of the aftermast where all might see, began to drub away at each other in most authentic quarterstaff style, their wands flashing in the sunlight and chiming sweetly when they clashed. The silence broke in rounds of exclamation and laughter. The five rats scampered down Fafhrd and returned with the bell-tinklers to cluster around the hem of Hisvet's skirt. Mouser and several officers were leaping down from the afterdeck to wring Fafhrd's good hand or clap his back. The marines had much ado to hold back the sailors, who were offering each other bets on which rat would be the winner in this new bout.

Fafhrd, fingering his chain, remarked to the Mouser, "Strange that the sailors were with me from the start," and under cover of the hubbub the Mouser smiling explained, "I gave them money to bet on you against the marines. Likewise I dropped some hints and made some loans for the same purpose to the officer of the other ships—a fighter can't have too big a claque. Also I started the story going round that the whiteys are anti-rat rats, trained exterminators of their own kind, sample of Glipkerio's latest device for the safety of the grain fleets—sailors eat up such tosh."

"Did you first cry victor?" Fafhrd asked.

The Mouser grinned. "A judge take sides? In *civilized* combat? Oh, I was prepared to, but 'twasn't needful."

At that moment Fafhrd felt a small tug at his trousers and looking down saw that the black kitten had bravely approached through the forest of legs and was now climbing him purposefully. Touched at this further

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display of animal homage, Fafhrd rumbled gently as the kitten reached his belt, "Decided to heal our quarrel, eh, small black one?" At that the kitten sprang up his chest, sunk his little claws in Fafhrd's bare shoulder and, glaring like a black hangman, raked Fafhrd bloodily across the jaw, then sprang by way of a couple of startled heads to the mainsail and rapidly climbed its concave taut brown curve. Someone threw a belaying pin at the small black blot, but it was negligently aimed and the kitten safely reached the mast-top.

"I FORSWEAR all cats!" Fafhrd cried angrily, dabbling at his chin. "Henceforth rats are my favored beasties."

"Most properly spoken, Swordsman!" Hisvet called gayly from her own circle of admirers, continuing, "I will be pleased by your company and the Dirksman's at dinner in my cabin an hour past sunset. We'll conform to the very letter of Slinoor's stricture that I be closely watched and the White Shadows too." She whistled a little call on her silver recorder and swept back into her cabin with the nine rats close at her heels. The quarterstaving scarlet-robed pair on the afterdeck broke off their drubbing with neither victorious and scampered after her, the crowd parting to make way for them admiringly.

Slinoor, hurrying forward, paused to watch. The *Squid*'s skipper was a man deeply bemused. Somewhere in the last half hour the white rats had been transformed from eerie poison-toothed monsters threatening the fleet into popular, clever, harmless animal-mountebanks, whom *Squid*'s sailors appeared to regard as a band of white mascots. Slinoor seemed to be seeking unsuccessfully but unceasingly to decipher how and why.

Lukeen, still looking very pale, followed the last of his disgruntled marines (their purses lighter by many a silver smerduk, for they had been coaxed into offering odds) over the side into *Shark*'s long dinghy, brushing off Slinoor when *Squid*'s skipper would have conferred with him.

Slinoor vented his chagrin by harshly commanding his sailors to leave off their disorderly milling and frisking, but they obeyed him right cheerily, skipping to their proper stations with the happiest of sailor smirks. Those passing the Mouser winked at him and surreptiously touched their forelocks. The *Squid* bowled smartly northward a half bowshot astern of *Tunny*, as she'd been doing throughout the duel, only now she began to cleave the blue water, a little

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more swiftly yet as the west wind freshened and her after sail was broken out. In fact, the fleet began to sail so swiftly now that *Shark*'s dinghy couldn't make the head of the line, although Lukeen could be noted bullying his marine-oarsmen into back-cracking efforts, and the dinghy had finally to signal *Shark* herself to come back and pick her up —which the war galley achieved only with difficulty, rolling dangerously in the mounting seas and taking until sunset, oars helping sails, to return to the head of the line.

"*He*'ll not be eager to come to *Squid*'s help tonight, or much able to either," Fafhrd commented to the Mouser where they stood by the larboard mid-deck rail. There had been no open break between them and Slinoor, but they were inclined to leave him the afterdeck, where he stood beyond the helmsmen in bent-head converse with his three officers, who had all lost money on Lukeen and had been sticking close to their skipper ever since.

"Not still expecting *that* sort of peril tonight, are you, Fafhrd?" the Mouser asked with a soft laugh. "We're far past the Rat Rocks."

Fafhrd shrugged and said frowningly, "Perhaps we've gone just a shade too far in endorsing the rats."

"Perhaps," the Mouser agreed. "But then their charming mistress is worth a fib and false stamp or two, aye and more than that, eh, Fafhrd?"

"She's a brave sweet lass," Fafhrd said carefully.

"Aye, and her maid too," the Mouser said brightly. "I noted Frix peering at you adoringly from the cabin entryway after your victory. A most voluptuous wench. Some men might well prefer the maid to the mistress in this instance. Fafhrd?"

Without looking around at the Mouser, the Northerner shook his head.

The Mouser studied Fafhrd, wondering if it were politic to make a certain proposal he had in mind. He was not quite certain of the full nature of Fafhrd's feelings toward Hisvet. He knew the Northerner was a goatish man enough and had yesterday seemed quite obsessed with the love-making they'd missed in Lankhmar, yet he also knew that his comrade had a variable romantic streak that was sometimes thin as a thread yet sometimes grew into a silken ribbon leagues wide in which armies might stumble and be lost.

On the afterdeck Slinoor was now conferring most earnestly with the cook, presumably (the Mouser decided) about Hisvet's (and his own and Fafhrd's) dinner. The thought of Slinoor hav-

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ing to go to so much trouble about the pleasures of three persons who today had thoroughly thwarted him made the Mouser grin and somehow also nerved him to take the uncertain step he'd been contemplating.

"Fafhrd," he whispered, "I'll dice you for Hisvet's favors."

"Why, Hisvet's but a gir—" Fafhrd began in accents of rebuke, then cut off abruptly and closed his eyes in thought. When he opened them, they were regarding the Mouser with a large smile.

"No," Fafhrd said softly, "for truly I think this Hisvet is so balky and fantastic a miss it will take both our most heartfelt and cunning efforts to persuade her to aught. And, after that, who knows? Dicing for such a girl's favors were like betting when a Lankhman night-lilly will open and whether to north or south."

The Mouser chuckled and lovingly dug Fafhrd in the ribs, saying, "There's my shrewd true comrade!"

Fafhrd looked at the Mouser with sudden dark suspicions. "Now don't go trying to get me drunk tonight," he warned, "or sifting opium in my drink."

"Hah, you know me better than that, Fafhrd," the Mouser said with laughing reproach.

"I certainly do," Fafhrd agreed sardonically.

Again the sun went under with a green flash, indicating crystal clear air to the west, though the strange fogbank, now an ominous dark wall, still paralleled their course a league or so to the east.

The cook, crying, "My mutton!" went racing forward past them toward the galley, whence a deliciously spicy aroma was wafting.

"We've an hour to kill," the Mouser said. "Come on, Fafhrd. On our way to board *Squid* I bought a little jar of wine of Quarmall at the Silver Eel. It's still sealed."

From just overhead in the ratlines, the black kitten hissed down at them in angry menace or perhaps warning.

TWO hours later the Demoiselle Hisvet offered to the Mouser, "A golden rilk for your thoughts, Dirksman."

She was on the swung-down sea-bed once more, half reclining. The long table, now laden with tempting viands and tall silver wine cups, had been placed against the bed. Fafhrd sat across from Hisvet, the empty silver cages behind him, while the Mouser was at the stern end of the table. Frix served them all from the door forward, where she took the trays from the cook's boys without giving them so much as a peep inside. She had a small brazier there for

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keeping hot such items as required it and she tasted each dish and set it aside for a while before serving it. Thick dark pink candles in silver sconces shed a pale light.

The white rats crouched in rather disorderly fashion around a little table of their own set on the floor near the wall between the sea-bed and the door, just aft of one of the trapdoors opening down into the grain-redolent hold. They wore little black jackets open at the front and little black belts around their middles. They seemed more to play with than eat the bits of food Frix set before them on their three or four little silver plates and they did not lift their small bowls to drink their wine-tinted water but rather lapped at them and that not very industriously. One or two would always be scampering up onto the bed to be with Hisvet, which made them most difficult to count, even for Fafhrd, who had the best view. Sometimes he got eleven, sometimes ten. At intervals one of them would stand up on the pink coverlet by Hisvet's knees and chitter at her in cadences so like those of human speech that Fafhrd and the Mouser would have to chuckle.

"Dreamy Dirksman, two rilks for your thoughts!" Hisvet repeated, upping her offer. "And most immodestly I'll wager a third rilk they are of me."

The Mouser smiled and lifted his eyebrows. He was feeling very light-headed and a bit uneasy, chiefly because contrary to his intentions he had been drinking much more than Fafhrd. Frix had just served them the main dish, a masterly yellow curry heavy with dark-tasting spices and originally appearing with "Victor" pricked on it with black capers. Fafhrd was devouring it manfully though not voraciously, the Mouser was going at it more slowly, while Hisvet all evening had merely toyed with her food.

"I'll take your two rilks, White Princess," the Mouser replied airily, "for I'll need one to pay the wager you've just won and the other to fee you for telling me *what* I was thinking of you."

"You'll not keep my second rilk long, Dirksman," Hisvet said merrily, "for as you thought of me you were looking not at my face, but most impudently somewhat lower. You were thinking of those somewhat nasty suspicions Lukeen voiced this day about my secretest person. Confess it now, you were!"

The Mouser could only hang his head a little and shrug helplessly, for she had most truly divined his thoughts. Hisvet laughed and frowned at him in mock anger, saying, "Oh, you are most indelicate minded,

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Dirksman. Yet at least you can see that Frix, though indubitably mammalian, is not fronted like a she-rat."

This statement was undeniably true, for Hisvet's maid was all dark smooth skin except where black silk scarves narrowly circled her slim body at breasts and hips. Silver net tightly confined her black hair and there were many plain silver bracelets on each wrist. Yet although garbed like a slave, Frix did not seem one tonight, but rather a lady-companion who expertly played at being slave, serving them all with perfect yet laughing, wholly unservile obedience.

Hisvet, by contrast, was wearing another of her long smocks, this of black silk edged with black lace, with a lace-edged hood half thrown back. Her silvery white hair was dressed high on her head in great smooth swelling sweeps. Regarding her across the table, Fafhrd said, "I am certain that the Demoiselle would be no les than completely beautiful to us in whatever shape she chose to present herself to the world—wholly human or somewhat otherwise."

"Now that was most gallantly spoken, Swordsman," Hisvet said with a somewhat breathless laugh. "I must reward you for it. Come to me, Frix." As the slim maid bent close to her, Hisvet twined her white hands round the dark waist and imprinted a sweet slow kiss on Frix's lips. Then she looked up and gave a little tap on the shoulder to Frix, who moved smiling around the table and, half kneeling by Fafhrd, kissed him as she had been kissed. He received the token graciously, without unmannerly excitement, yet when Frix would have drawn back, prolonged the kiss, explaining a bit thickly when he released her: "Somewhat extra to return to the sender, perchance." She grinned at him saucily and went to her serving table by the door, saying, "I must first chop the rats their meat, naughty barbarian." While Hisvet discoursed, "Don't seek too much, Bold Swordsman. That was in any case but a small proxy reward for a small gallant speech. A reward with the mouth for words spoken with the mouth. To reward you for drubbing Lukeen and vindicating my honor were a more serious matter altogether, not to be entered on lightly if at all. I'll think of it."

AT this point the Mouser, who just had to be saying something but whose fuddled brain was momentarily empty of suitably venturesome yet courteous wit, called out to Frix, "Why chop you the rats their mutton,

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dusky minx? 'Twould be rare sport to see them slice it for themselves." Frix only wrinkled her nose at him, but Hisvet expounded gravely, "Only Skwee carves with any great skill. The others might hurt themselves, particularly with the meat shifting about in the slippery curry. Frix, reserve a single chunk for Skwee to display us his ability. Chop the rest fine. Skwee!" she called, setting her voice high. "Skwee-skwee-skwee!"

A tall rat sprang onto the bed and stood dutifully before her with forelegs folded across his chest. Hisvet instructed him, then took from a silver box behind her a most tiny carving set of knife, steel and fork in joined treble scabbard and tied it carefully to his belt. Then Skwee bowed low to her and sprang nimbly down to the rats' table.

The Mouser watched the little scene with clouded and heavy-lidded wonder, feeling that he was falling under some sort of spell. At times thick shadows crossed the cabin, at times Skwee grew tall as Hisvet or perhaps it

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was Hisvet tiny as Skwee. And then the Mouser grew small as Skwee too and ran under the bed and fell into a chute that darkly swiftly slid him, not into a dark hold of sacked or loose delicious grain, but into the dark spacious low-ceilinged pleasance of a subterranean rat metropolis, lit by phosphorus, where robed and long-skirted rats whose hoods hid their long faces moved about mysteriously, where rat swords clashed behind the next pillar and rat money chinked, where lewd female rats danced in their fur for a fee, where rat spies and rat informers lurked, where everyone — every-*furry*-one — was cringingly conscious of the omniscient overlordship of a supernally powerful Council of Thirteen, and where a rat Mouser sought everywhere a slim rat princess named Hisvet-sur-Hisvin.

The Mouser woke from his dinnerdream with a jerk. Somehow he'd surely drunk even more cups than he'd counted, he told himself haltingly. Skwee, he saw, had returned to the rats' table and was standing before the yellow chunk Frix had set on the silver platter at Skwee's end. With the other rats watching him, Skwee drew forth knife and steel with a flourish. The Mouser roused himself more fully with another jerk and shake and was inspired to say, "Ah, were I but a rat, White Princess, so that I might come as close to you, serving you!"

The Demoiselle Hisvet cried, "A tribute indeed!" and laughed with delight, showing—it appeared to the Mouser—a tongue half splotched with bluish black and an inner mouth similarly pied. Then she said rather soberly, "Have a care what you wish, for some wishes have been granted," but at once continued gayly, "Nevertheless, 'twas most gallantly said, Dirksman. I must reward you. Frix, sit at my right side here."

The Mouser could not see what passed between them, for Hisvet's loosely smocked form hid Frix from him, but the merry eyes of the maid peered steadily at him over Hisvet's shoulder, twinkling like the black silk. Hisvet seemed to be whispering into Frix's ear while nuzzling it playfully.

MEANWHILE there commenced the faintest of high *skirrings* as Skwee rapidly clashed steel and knife together, sharpening the latter. The Mouser could barely see the rat's head and shoulders and the tiny glimmer of flashing metal over the larger table intervening. He felt the urge to stand and move closer to observe the prodigy—and perchance glimpse something of the interesting activi-

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ties of Hisvet and Frix—but he was held fast by a great lethargy, whether of wine or sensuous anticipation or pure magic he could not tell.

He had one great worry—that Fafhrd would out with a cleverer compliment than his own, one so much cleverer that it might even divert Frix's mission to him. But then he noted that Fafhrd's chin had fallen to his chest, and there came to his ears along with the silvery *klirring* the barbarian's gently rumbling snores.

The Mouser's first reaction was pure wicked relief. He remembered gloatingly past times he'd gamboled while his comrade snored sodden. Fafhrd must after all have been sneaking many extra swigs or whole drinks!

Frix jerked and giggled immoderately. Hisvet continued to whisper in her ear while Frix giggled and cooed again from time to time, continuing to watch the Mouser impishly.

Skwee scabbarded the steel with a tiny *clash*, drew the fork with a flourish, plunged it into the yellow-coated meat-chunk, big as a roast for him, and began to carve most dexterously.

Frix rose at last, received her tap from Hisvet, and headed around the table, smiling the while at the Mouser.

Skwee up with a paper-thin tiny slice of mutton on his fork and flapped it this way and that for all to see, then brought it close to his muzzle for a sniff and a taste.

The Mouser in his dreamy slump felt a sudden twinge of apprehension. It had occured to him that Fafhrd simply couldn't have sneaked *that* much extra wine. Why, the Northerner hadn't been out of his sight the past two hours. Of course blows on the head sometimes had a delayed effect.

All the same his first reaction was pure angry jealousy when Frix paused beside Fafhrd and leaned over his shoulder and looked in his forward-tipped face.

Just then there came a great squeak of outrage and alarm from Skwee and the white rat sprang up onto the bed, still holding carving knife and fork with the mutton slice dangling from it.

From under eyelids that persisted in drooping lower and lower, the Mouser watched Skwee gesticulate with his tiny implements, as he chittered dramatically to Hisvet in most manlike cadences, and finally lift the petal of mutton to her lips with an accusing squeak.

Then, coming faintly through the chittering, the Mouser heard a host of stealthy footsteps crossing the middeck, converging on the cabin. He tried to call

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Hisvet's attention to it, but found his lips and tongue numb and unobedient to his will.

Frix suddenly grasped the hair of Fafhrd's forehead and jerked his head up and back. The Northerner's jaw hung slackly, his eyes fell open, showing only whites.

There was a gentle rapping at the door, exactly the same as the cook's boys had made delivering the earlier courses.

A look passed between Hisvet and Frix. The latter dropped Fafhrd's head, darted to the door, slammed the bar across it and locked the bar with the chain (the grille already being shut) just as something (a man's shoulder, it sounded) thudded heavily against the thick panels.

That thudding continued and a few heartbeats later became much more sharply ponderous, as if a spare mast-section were being swung like a battering ram against the door, which yielded visibly at each blow.

THE Mouser realized at last, much against his will, that something was happening that he ought to do something about. He made a great effort to shake off his lethargy and spring up.

He found he could not even twitch a finger. In fact it was all he could do to keep his eyes from closing altogether and watch through lash-blurred slits as Hisvet, Frix and the rats spun into a whirlwind of silent activity.

Frix jammed her serving table against the jolting door and began to pile other furniture against it.

Hisvet dragged out from behind the sea-bed various dark long boxes and began to unlock them. As fast as she threw them open the white rats helped themselves to the small blued-iron weapons they contained: swords, spears, even most wicked-looking blued-iron cross bows with belted cannisters of darts. They took more weapons than they could effectively use themselves. Skwee hurriedly put on a black-plumed helmet that fitted down over his furry cheeks. The number of rats busy around the boxes was ten —that much the Mouser noted clearly.

A split appeared in the middle of the piled door. Nevertheless Frix sprang away from there to the starboard trap door leading to the hold and heaved it up. Hisvet threw herself on the floor toward it and thrust her head down into the dark square hole.

There was something terribly animal-like about the movements of the two women. It may have been only the cramped quarters and the low ceiling, but it seemed to the Mouser that they moved by preference on all fours.

All the while Fafhrd's chest-

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sunk head kept lifting very slowly and then falling with a jerk as he went on snoring.

Hisvet sprang up and waved on the ten white rats. Led by Skwee, they trooped down through the hatch, their blued-iron weapons flashing and once or twice clashing, and were gone in a twinkling. Frix grabbed dark garments out of a curtained niche. Hisvet caught her by the wrist and thrust the maid ahead of her down the trap and then descended herself. Before pulling the hatch down above her, she took a last look around the cabin. As her red eyes gazed briefly at the Mouser, it seemed to him that her forehead and cheeks were grown over with silky white hair, but that may well have been a combination of eyelash-blue and her own disordered hair streaming and streaking down across her face.

THE cabin door split and a man's length of thick mast boomed through, overturning the bolstering table and scattering the furniture set on and against it. After the mast end came piling in three apprehensive sailors followed by Slinoor holding a cutlass low and Slinoor's starsman (navigation officer) with a crossbow at the cock.

Slinoor pressed ahead a little and surveyed the scene swiftly yet intently, then said, "Our poppy-dust curry has taken Glipkerio's two lust-besotted rogues, but Hisvet's hid with her nymphy slavegirl. The rats are out of their cages. Search, sailors! Starsman, cover us!"

Gingerly at first, but soon in a rush, the sailors searched the cabin, tumbling the empty boxes and jerking the quilts and mattress off the sea-bed and swinging it up to see beneath, heaving chests away from walls and flinging open the unlocked ones, sweeping Hisvet's wardrobe in great silken armfuls out of the curtained niches in which it had been hanging.

The Mouser again made a mighty effort to speak or move, with no more success than to widen his blurred eye-slits a little. A sailor louted into him and he helplessly collapsed sideways against an arm of his chair without quite falling out of it. Fafhrd got a shove behind and slumped face-down on the table in a dish of stewed plums, his great arms outsweeping unconsciously upsetting cups and scattering plates.

The starsman kept crossbow trained on each new space uncovered. Slinoor watched with eagle eye, flipping aside silken fripperies with his cutlass point and using it to overset the rats' table, peering the while narrowly.

"There's where the vermin

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feasted like men," he observed disgustedly. "The curry was set before them. Would they had gorged themselves senseless on it."

"Likely they were the ones to note the drug even through the masking spices of the curry, and warn the women," the starsman put in. "Rats are prodigiously wise to poisons."

As it became apparent neither girls nor rats were in the cabin, Slinoor cried with angry anxiety, "They can't have escaped to the deck—here's the sky-trap locked below besides our guard above. The mate's party bars the after hold. Perchance the sternlights—"

But just then the Mouser heard one of the horn windows behind him being opened and the *Squid*'s arms-master call from there, "Naught came this way. Where are they, captain?"

"Ask someone wittier than I," Slinoor tossed him sourly. "Certain they're not here."

"Would that these two could speak," the starsman wished, indicating the Mouser and Fafhrd.

"No," Slinoor said dourly. "They'd just lie. Cover the larboard trap to the hold. I'll have it up and speak to the mate."

JUST then footsteps came hurrying across the middeck and the *Squid*'s mate with blood-streaked face entered by the broken door, half dragging and half supporting a sailor who seemed to be holding a thin stick to his own bloody cheek.

"Why have you left the hold?" Slinoor demanded of the first. "You should be with your party below."

"Rats ambushed us on our way to the after hold," the mate gasped. "There were dozens of blacks led by a white, some armed like men. The sword of a beam-hanger almost cut my eye across. Two foamy-mouthed springers dashed out our lamp. 'Twere pure folly to have gone on in the dark. There's scarce a man of my party not bitten, slashed or jabbed. I left them guarding the foreway to the hold. They say their wounds are poisoned and talk of nailing down the hatch."

"Oh monstrous cowardice!" Slinoor cried. "You've spoiled my trap that would have scotched them at the start. Now all's to do and difficult. Oh scarelings! Daunted by rats!"

"I tell you they were armed!" the mate protested and then, swinging the sailor forward, "Here's my proof with a spearlet in his cheek."

"Don't drag her out, captain, sir," the sailor begged as Slinoor moved to examine his face. "'Tis barbed for certain and poisoned too, I wot."

"Hold still, boy," Slinoor com-

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manded. "And take your hands away—I've got it firm. The point's near the skin. I'll drive it out forward so the barbs don't catch. Pinion his arms, mate. Don't move your face, boy, or you'll be hurt worse. If it's poisoned, it must come out the faster. There!"

The sailor squeaked. Fresh blood rilled down his cheek.

"'Tis a nasty needle indeed," Slinoor commended, inspecting the bloody point. "Doesn't look poisoned. Mate, gently cut off the shaft aft of the wound, draw out the rest forward."

"Here's further proof, most wicked," said the starsman, who'd been picking about in the litter. He handed Slinoor a tiny crossbow.

Slinoor held it up before him. In the pale candlelight it gleamed bluely, while the skipper's dark-circled eyes were like agates.

"Here's evil's soul," he cried. "Perchance 'twas well you were ambushed in the hold. 'Twill teach each mariner to hate and fear all rats again, like a good grain-sailor should. And now by a swift certain killing of all rats on *Squid* wipe out today's traitrous folery, when you clapped for rats and let rats lead your cheers, seduced by a scarlet girl and bribed by that most misnamed Mouser."

The Mouser, still paralyzed and perforce watching Slinoor a-slant as Slinoor pointed at him, had to admit it was a well-turned reference to himself.

"First off," Slinoor said, "drag those two rogues on deck. Truss them to mast or rail. I'll not have them waking to botch my victory."

"Shall I up with a trap and loose a dart in the after hold?" the starsman asked eagerly.

"You should know better," was all Slinoor answered.

"Shall I gong for the galley and run up a red lamp?" the mate suggested.

Slinoor was silent two heartbeats, then said, "No. This is *Squid's* fight to wipe out today's shame. Besides, Lukeen's a hothead botcher. Forget I said that, gentlemen, but it is so."

"Yet we'd be safer with the galley standing by," the mate ventured to continue. "Even now the rats may be gnawing holes in us."

"That's unlikely with the Rat Queen below," Slinoor retorted. "Speed's what will save us and not stand-by ships. Now hearken close. Guard well all ways to the hold. Keep traps and hatches shut. Rouse the off watch. Arm every man. Gather on middeck all we can spare from sailing. Move!"

The Mouser wished Slinoor hadn't said "Move!" quite so vehemently, for the two sailors

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instantly grabbed his ankles and dragged him most enthusiastically out of the littered cabin and across the middeck, his head bumping a bit. True, he couldn't feel the bumps, only hear them.

To the west the sky was a quarter globe of stars, to the east a mass of fog below and thinner mist above, with the gibbous moon shining through the latter like a pale misshapen silver ghost-lamp. The wind had slackened. *Squid* sailed smoothly.

ONE sailor held the Mouser against the mainmast, facing aft, while the other looped rope around him. As the sailors bound him with his arms flat to his sides, the Mouser felt a tickle in his throat and life returning to his tongue, but he decided not to try to speak just yet. Slinoor in his present mood might order him gagged.

The Mouser's next divertisement was watching Fafhrd dragged out by four sailors and bound lengthwise, facing inboard with head aft and higher than feet, to the larboard rail. It was quite a comic performance, but the Northerner snored through it.

Sailors began to gather then on middeck, some palely silent but most quipping in low voices. Pikes and cutlasses gave them courage. Some carried nets and long sharp-tined forks. Even the cook came with a great cleaver, which he hefted playfully at the Mouser.

"Struck dumb with admiration of my sleepy curry eh?"

Meanwhile the Mouser found he could move his fingers. No one had bothered to disarm him, but Cat's Claw was unfortunately fixed far too high on his left side for either hand to touch, let alone get out of its scabbard. He felt the hem of his tunic until he touched, through the cloth, a rather small flat round object thinner along one edge than the other. Gripping it by the thick edge through the cloth, he began to scrape with the thin edge at the fabric confining it.

The sailors crowded aft as Slinoor emerged from the cabin with his officers and began to issue low-voiced orders. The Mouser caught "Slay Hisvet or her maid on sight. They're not women but were-rats or worse," and then the last of Slinoor's orders: "Poise your parties below the hatch or trap by which you enter. When you hear the bosun's whistle, move!"

The effect of this "Move!" was rather spoiled by a tiny *twing* and the arms-master clapping his hand to his eye and screaming. There was a flurry of movement among the sailors. Cutlasses struck at a pale form that scurried along the deck. For an instant a rat with a crossbow in

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his hands was silhouetted on the starboard rail against the moon-pale mist. Then the starsman's crossbow twanged and the dart winging with exceptional accuracy or luck knocked the rat off the rail into the sea.

"That was a whitey, lads!" Slinoor cried. "A good omen!"

Thereafter there was some confusion, but it was quickly settled, especially when it was discovered that the starsman had not been struck in the eye but only near it, and the beweaponed parties moved off, one into the cabin, two forward past the mainmast, leaving on deck a skeleton crew of four.

The fabric the Mouser had been scraping parted and he most carefully eased out of the shredded hem an iron tik (the Lankhmar coin of least value) with half its edge honed to razor sharpness and began to slice with it in tiny strokes at the nearest loop of the line binding him. He looked hopefully toward Fafhrd, but the latter's head still hung at a senseless angle.

A whistle sounded faintly, followed some ten breaths later by a louder one from another part of the hold, it seemed. Then muffled shouts began to come in flurries there were two screams, something thumped the deck from below, and a sailor swinging a rat squeaking in a net dashed past the Mouser.

The Mouser's fingers told him he was almost through the first loop. Leaving it joined by a few threads, he began to slice at the next loop, bending his wrist acutely to do it.

An explosion shook the deck, stinging the Mouser's feet. He could not conjecture its nature and sawed furiously with his sharpened coin. The skeleton crew cried out and one of the helmsmen fled forward but the other stuck by the tiller. Somehow the gong clanged once, though no one was by it.

THEN *Squid*'s sailors began to pour up out of the hold, half of them without weapons and frantic with fear. They milled about. The Mouser could hear sailors dragging *Squid*'s boats, which were forward of the mainmast, to the ship's side. The Mouser gathered that the sailors had fared most evilly below, assaulted by batallions of black rats, confused by false whistles, slashed and jabbed from dark corners, stung by darts, two struck in the eye and blinded. What had completed their rout was that, coming to a hold of unsacked grain, they'd found the air above it choked with grain dust from the recent churnings and scatterings of a horde of rats, and Frix had thrown in fire from beyond, exploding the stuff and knocking them off their feet

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though not setting fire to the ship.

At the same time as the panic-stricken sailors, there also came on deck another group, noted only by the Mouser—a most quiet and orderly file of black rats that went climbing around him up the mainmast. The Mouser weighed crying an alarm, although he wouldn't have wagered a tik on his chances of survival with hysterical be-cutlassed sailors rat-slashing all around him.

In any case his decision was made for him in the negative by Skwee, who climbed on his left shoulder just then. Holding on by a lock of the Mouser's hair, Skwee leaned out in front of him, staring into the Mouser's left eye with his own two wally blue ones under his black-plumed silver helmet. Skwee touched pale paw to his buck-toothed lips, enjoining silence, then patted the little sword at his side and jerked his rat-thumb across his rat-throat to indicate the penalty for silence broken. Thereafter he retired into the shadows by the Mouser's ear, presumably to watch the routed sailors and wave on and command his own company—and keep close to the Mouser's jugular vein. The Mouser kept sawing with his coin.

The starsman came aft followed by three sailors with two white lanterns apiece. Skwee crowd back closer between the Mouser and the mast, but touched the cold flat of his sword to the Mouser's neck, just under the ear, as a reminder. The Mouser remembered Hisvet's kiss. With a frown at the Mouser the starsman avoided the mainmast and had the sailors hang their lanterns to the aftermast and the crane fittings and the forward range of the afterdeck, fussing about the exact positions. He asserted in a high babble that light was the perfect military defense and counter-weapon, and talked wildly of light-entrenchments and light palisades, and was just about to set the sailors hunting more lamps, when Slinoor limped out of the cabin bloody-foreheaded and looked around.

"Courage, lads," Slinoor shouted hoarsely. "On deck we're still masters. Let down the boats orderly, lads, we'll need 'em to fetch the marines. Run up the red lamp! You there, gong the alarm!"

Someone responded, "The gong's gone overboard. The ropes that hung it—gnawed!"

At the same time thickening waves of fog came out of the east, shrouding *Squid* in deadly moonlit silver. A sailor moaned. It was a strange fog that seemed to increase rather than diminish the amount of light cast by the

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moon and the starsmen's lantern. Colors stood out, yet soon there was only white wall beyond the *Squid's* rails.

Slinoor ordered, "Get up the spare gong! Cook, let's have your biggest kettles, lids and pots—anything to beat an alarm!"

There were two splashing thumps as *Squid*'s boats hit the water.

Someone screamed agonizingly in the cabin.

Then two things happened together. The mainsail parted from the mast, falling to starboard like a cathedral ceiling in a gale, its lines and ties to the mast gnawed loose or sawed by tiny swords. It floated darkly on the water, dragging the boom wide. *Squid* lurched to starboard.

At the same time a horde of black rats spewed out of the cabin door and came pouring over the taffrail, the latter presumably by way of the stern lights. They rushed at the humans in waves, springing with equal force and resolution whether they landed on pike points or tooth-clinging to noses and throats.

THE sailors broke and made for the boats, rats landing on their backs and nipping at their heels. The officers fled too. Slinoor was carried along, crying for a last stand. Skwee out with his sword on the Mouser's shoulder and bravely waved on his suicidal soldiery, chittering high, then leaped down to follow in their rear. Four white rats armed with crossbows knelt on the crane fittings and began to crank, load and fire with great efficiency.

Splashings began, first two and three, then what sounded like a half dozen together, mixed with screams. The Mouser twisted his head around and from the corner of his eye saw the last two of *Squid*'s sailors leap over the side. Straining a little further around yet, he saw Slinoor clutch to his chest two rats that worried him and follow the sailors. The four white-furred arbalasters leaped down from the crane fittings and raced toward a new firing position on the prow. Hoarse human cries came up from the water and faded off. Silence fell on *Squid* like the fog, broken only by the inevitable chitterings and those few now.

When the Mouser turned his head aft again, Hisvet was standing before him. She was dressed in close-fitting black leather from neck to elbows and knees, looking most like a slim boy, and she wore a black leather helmet fitting down over her temples and cheeks like Skwee's silver one, her white hair streaming down in a tail behind making her

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plume. A slim dagger was scabbarded on her left hip.

"Dear, dear Dirksman," she said softly, smiling with her little mouth, "You at least do not desert me," and she reached out and almost brushed his cheek with her fingers. Then, "Bound!" she said, seeming to see the rope for the first time and drawing back her hand. "We must remedy that, Dirksman."

"I would be most grateful, White Princess," the Mouser said humbly. Nevertheless, he did not let go his sharpened coin, which although somewhat dulled had now sliced almost halfway through a third loop.

"We must remedy that," Hisvet repeated a little absently, her gaze straying beyond the Mouser. "But my fingers are too soft and unskilled to deal with such mighty knots as I see. Frix will release you. Now I must hear Skwee's report on the afterdeck. Skwee-skwee-skwee!"

As she turned and walked aft the Mouser saw that her hair all went through a silver-ringed hole in the back top of her black helmet. Skwee came running past the Mouser and when he had almost caught up with Hisvet he took position to her right and three rat-paces behind her, strutting with forepaw on sword-hilt and head held high, like a captain-general behind his empress.

As the Mouser resumed his weary sawing of the third loop, he looked at Fafhrd bound to the rail and saw that the black kitten was crouched fur-on-end on Fafhrd's neck and slowly raking his cheek with the spread claws of a forepaw while the Northerner still snored garglingly. Then the kitten dipped its head and bit Fafhrd's ear. Fafhrd groaned piteously, but then came another of the gargling snores. The kitten resumed its cheek-raking. Two rats, one white, one black, walked by and the kitten wauled at them softly yet direly. The rats stopped and stared, then scurried straight toward the afterdeck, presumably to report the unwholesome condition to Skwee or Hisvet.

THE Mouser decided to burst loose without more ado, but just then the four white arbalasters came back dragging a brass cage of frightenedly cheeping wrens the Mouser remembered seeing hanging by a sailor's bunk in the forecastle. They stopped by the crane fittings again and started a wren-shoot. They'd release one of the tiny terrified flutterers, then as it winged off bring it down with a well-aimed dart—at distances up to five and six yards, never missing. Once or twice one of them would glance at the Mouser narrowly and touch the dart's point.

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Frix stepped down the ladder from the afterdeck. She was now dressed like her mistress, except she had no helmet, only the tight silver hairnet, though the silver rings were gone from her wrists.

"Lady Frix!" the Mouser called in a light voice, almost gayly. It was hard to say how one should speak on a ship manned by rats, but a high voice seemed indicated.

She came towards him smiling, but "Frix will do better," she said. "Lady is such a corset title."

"Frix then," the Mouser called, "on your way would you scare that black witch cat from our poppy-sodden friend? He'll rake out my comrade's eye."

Frix looked sideways to see what the Mouser meant, but still kept stepping toward him.

"I never interfere with another person's pleasures or pains, since it's hard to be certain which are which," she informed him, coming close. "I only carry out my mistress's directives. Now she bids me tell you be patient and of good cheer. Your trials will soon be over. And this withal she sends you as a remembrancer." Lifting her mouth, she kissed the Mouser softly on each upper eyelid.

The Mouser said, "That's the kiss with which the green priestess of Djil seals the eyes of those departing this world."

"Is it?" Frix asked softly.

"Aye, 'tis," the Mouser said with a little shudder, continuing briskly, "So now undo me these knots, Frix, which is something your mistress has directed. And then perchance give me a livelier smack—after I've looked to Fafhrd."

"I only carry out the directives of my mistress' own mouth," Frix said, shaking her head a little sadly. "She said nothing to me about untieing knots. But doubtless she will direct me to loose you shortly."

"Doubtless," the Mouser agreed, a little glumly, forbearing to saw with his coin at the third loop while Frix watched him. If he could but sever at once three loops, he told himself, he might be able to shake off the remaining ones in a not impossibly large number of heartbeats.

As if on cue, Hisvet stepped lightly down from the afterdeck and hastened to them.

"Dear mistress, do you bid me undo the Dirksman his knots?" Frix asked at once, almost as if she wanted to be told to.

"I will attend to matters here," Hisvet replied hurriedly. "Go you to the afterdeck, Frix, and harken and watch for my father. He delays overlong this night." She also ordered the white crossbow-rats, who'd winged their last wren, to retire to the afterdeck.

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AFTER Frix and the rats had gone, Hisvet gazed at the Mouser for the space of a score of heartbeats, frowning just a little, studying him deeply with her red-irised eyes.

Finally she said with a sigh, "I wish I could be certain."

"Certain of what, White Princessship?" the Mouser asked.

"Certain that you love me truly," she answered softly yet downrightly, as if he surely knew. "Many men—aye and women too and demons and beasts—have told me they loved me truly, but truly I think none of them loved me for myself (save Frix, whose happiness is in being a shadow) but only because I was young or beautiful or a demoiselle of Lankhmar or dreadfully clever or had a rich father or was dowered with power, being blood-related to the rats, which is a certain sign of power in more worlds than Nehwon. Do you truly love me for myself, Gray Mouser?"

"I love you most truly indeed, Shadow Princess," the Mouser said with hardly an instant's hesitation. "Truly I love you for yourself alone, Hisvet. I love you more dearly than aught else in Nehwon—aye, and in all other worlds too and heaven and hell besides."

Just then Fafhrd, cruelly clawed or bit by the kitten, let off a most piteous groan indeed with a dreadful high note in it, and the Mouser said impulsively, "Dear Princess, first chase me that were-cat from my large friend, for I fear it will be his blinding and death's bane, and then we shall discourse of our great loves to the end of eternity."

"*That* is what I mean," Hisvet said softly and reproachfully. "If you loved me truly for myself, Gray Mouser, you would not care a feather if your closest friend or your wife or mother or child were tortured and done to death before your eyes, so long as my eyes were upon you and I touched you with my fingertips. With my kisses on your lips and my slim hands playing about you, my whole person accepting and welcoming you, you could watch your large friend there scratched to blindness and death by a cat—or mayhap eaten alive by rats—and be utterly content. I have touched few things in this world, Gray Mouser. I have touched no man, or male demon or larger male beast, save by the proxy of Frix. Remember that, Gray Mouser."

"To be sure, Dear Light of my Life!" the Mouser replied most spiritedly, certain now of the sort of self-adoring madness with which he had to deal, since he had a touch of the same mania and so was well-acquainted with it. "Let the barbarian bleed to

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death by pinpricks! Let the cat have his eyes! Let the rats banquet on him to his bones! What skills it while we trade sweet words and caresses, discoursing to each other with our entire bodies and our whole souls!"

Meanwhile, however, he had started to saw again most fiercely with his now-dulled coin, unmindful of Hisvet's eyes upon him. It joyed him to feel Cat's Claw lying against his ribs.

"That's spoken like my own true Mouser," Hisvet said with most melting tenderness, brushing her fingers so close to his cheek that he could feel the tiny chill zephyr of their passage. Then, turning, she called, "Holla, Frix! Send to me Skwee and the White Company. Each may bring with him two black comrades of his own choice. I have somewhat of a reward for them, somewhat of a special treat. Skwee! Skwee-skwee-skwee!"

What would have happened then, both instantly and ultimately, is impossible to say, for at that moment Frix hailed, "Ahoy!" into the fog and called happily down, "A black sail! Oh Blessed Demoiselle, it is your father!"

OUT of the pearly fog to starboard came the shark's-fin triangle of the upper portion of a black sail, running alongside *Squid* aft of the dragging brown mainsail. Two boathooks a small ship's length apart came up and clamped down on the starboard middeck rail while the black sail flapped. Frix came running lightly forward and secured to the rail midway between the boathooks the top of a rope ladder next heaved up from the black cutter (for surely this must be that dire craft, the Mouser thought).

Then up the ladder and over the rail came nimbly an old man of Lankhmar dressed all in black leather and on his left shoulder a white rat clinging with right forepaw to a cheek-flap of his black leather cap. He was followed swiftly by two lean bald Mingols with faces yellow-brown as old lemons, each shoulder-bearing a large black rat that steadied itself by a yellow ear.

At that moment, most coincidentally, Fafhrd groaned again, more loudly, and opened his eyes and cried out in the faraway moan of an opium-dreamer, "Millions of black monkeys! Take him off, I say! 'Tis a black fiend of hell torments me! Take him off!"

At that the black kitten raised up, stretched out its small evil face, and bit Fafhrd on the nose. Disregarding this interruption, Hisvet threw up her hand at the newcomers and cried clearly, "Greetings, oh Cocommander my Father! Greetings, peerless rat

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captain Grig! *Clam* is conquered by you, now *Squid* by me, and this very night, after small business of my own attended to, shall see the perdition of all this final fleet. Then it's Movarl estranged, the Mingols across the Sinking Land, Glipkerio hurled down, and the rats ruling Lankhmar under my overlordship and yours!"

The Mouser, sawing ceaselessly at the third loop, chanced to note Skwee's muzzle at that moment. The small white captain had come down from the afterdeck at Hisvet's summoning along with eight white comrades, two bandaged, and now he shot Hisvet a silent look that seemed to say there might be doubts about the last item of her boast, once the rats ruled Lankhmar.

Hisvet's father Hisvin had a long-nosed, much wrinkled face patched by a week of white, old-man's beard, and he seemed permanently stooped far over, yet he moved most briskly for all that, taking very rapid little shuffling steps.

NOW he answered his daughter's bragging speech with a petulant sideways flirt of his black glove close to his chest and a little impatient "Tsk-tsk!" of disapproval, then went circling the deck at his odd scuttling gait while the Mingols waited by the ladder-top. Hisvin circled by Fafhrd and his black tormenter ("Tsk-tsk!") and by the Mouser (another "Tsk!") and stopping in front of Hisvet said rapid and fumingly, still crouched over, jogging a bit from foot to foot, "Here's confusion indeed tonight! You catsing and romancing with bound men!—I know, I know! The moon coming through too much! (I'll have my astrologer's liver!) *Shark* oaring like a mad cuttlefish through the foggy white! A black balloon with little lights scudding above the waves! And but now ere we found you, a vast sea monster swimming about in circles with a gibbering demon on his head—it came sniffing at us as if we were dinner, but we evaded it!

"Daughter, you and your maid and your little people must into the cutter at once with us, pausing only to slay these two and leave a suicide squad of gnawers to sink *Squid*!"

"Sink *Squid?*" Hisvet questioned. "The plan was to slip her to Ilthmar with a Mingol skeleton crew and there sell her cargo."

"Plans change!" Hisvin snapped. "Daughter, if we're not off this ship in forty breaths, *Shark* will ram us by pure excess of blundering energy or the monster with the clown-clad mad mahout will eat us up as we drift here helpless. Give orders

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to Skwee! Then out with your knife and cut me these two fools' throats! Quick, quick!"

"But Daddy," Hisvet objected, "I had something quite different in mind for them. Not death, at least not altogether. Something far more artistic, even loving—"

"I give you thirty breaths each to torture ere you slay them!" Hisvin conceded. "Thirty breaths and not one more, mind you! I know your somethings!"

"Dad, don't be crude! Among new friends! *Why* must you always give people a wrong impression of me? I won't endure it longer!"

"Chat-chat-chat! You pother and pose more than your rat-mother."

"But I tell you I won't endure it. This time we're going to do things *my* way for a change!"

"Hist-hist!" her father commanded, stooping still lower and cupping hand to left ear, while his white rat Grig imitated his gesture on the other side.

Faintly through the fog came a gibbering. "Gottverdammter Nebel! Freunde, wo sind Sie?"*

"'Tiz the gibberer!" Hisvin cried under his breath. "The monster will be upon us! Quick, daughter, out with your knife and slay, or I'll have my Mingols dispatch them!"

Hisvet lifted her hand against that villainous possibility. Her proudly plumed head literally bent to the inevitable.

"I'll do it," she said. "Skwee, give me your crossbow. Load with silver."

The white rat captain folded his forelegs across his chest and chittered at her with a note of demand.

"No, you can't have him," she said sharply. "You can't have either of them. They're mine now."

Another curt chitter from Skwee.

"Very well, your people may have the small black one. Now quick with your crossbow or I'll curse you! Remember, only a smooth silver dart."

Hisvin had scuttled to his Mingols and now he went around in a little circle, almost spitting. Frix glided smiling to him and touched his arm but he shook away from her with an angry flirt.

Skwee was fumbling into his cannister rat-frantically. His eight comrades were fanning out across the deck toward Fafhrd and the black kitten, which leaped down now in front of Fafhrd, snarling defiance.

Fafhrd himself was looking about bloody-faced but at last lucid-eyed, drinking in the desperate situation, poppy-langour banished by nose-bite.

*"Goddam fog! Friends, where are you?" Evidently Karl Treuherz' Lankhmarese dictionary was unavailable to him at the moment.

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Just then there came another gibber through the fog. "Gottverdammter Nirgendswelt!"*

Fafhrd's blood-shot eyes widened and brightened with a great inspiration. Bracing himself against his bonds, he inflated his mighty chest.

"HOONGK!" he bellowed. "HOONGK!"

Out of the fog came eager answer, growing each time louder: "Hoongk! *Hoongk!* HOONGK!"

SEVEN of the eight white rats that had crossed the deck now returned carrying stretched between them the still-snarling black kitten spread-eagled on its back, one to each paw and ear while the seventh tried to master but was shaken from side to side by the whipping tail. The eighth came hobbling behind on three legs, shoulder paralyzed by a deep-stabbing cat-bite.

From cabin and forecastle and all corners of the deck, the black rats scurried in to watch gloatingly their traditional enemy mastered and delivered to torment, until the middeck was thick with their bloaty dark forms.

Hisvin cracked a command at his Mingols. Each drew a wavy-edged knife. One headed for Fafhrd, the other for the Mouser. Black rats hid their feet.

Skwee dumped his tiny darts on the deck. His paw closed on a palely gleaming one and he slapped it in his crossbow, which he hurriedly handed up toward his mistress. She lifted it in her right hand toward Fafhrd, but just then the Mingol moving toward the Mouser crossed in front of her, his kreese point-first before him. She shifted crossbow to left hand, whipped out her dagger and darted ahead of the Mingol.

Meanwhile the Mouser had snapped the three cut loops with one surge. The others still confined him loosely at ankles and throat, but he reached across his body, drew Cat's Claw and slashed out at the Mingol as Hisvet shouldered the yellow man aside.

The dirk sliced her pale cheek from jaw to nose.

The other Mingol, advancing his kreese toward Fafhrd's throat, abruptly dropped to the deck and began to roll back across it, the black rats squeaking and snapping at him in surprise.

"HOONK!"

A great green dragon's head had loomed from the moon-mist over the larboard rail just at the spot where Fafhrd was tied. Strings of slaver trailed on the Northerner from the dagger-toothed jaws.

Like a fonderous jack-in-the-

*"Goddam Nowhere-World!"

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box, the red-mawed head dipped and drove forward, lower jaw rasping the oaken deck and sweeping up from it a swathe of black rats three rats wide. The jaws crunched together on their great squealing mouthful inches from the rolling Mingol's head. Then the green head swayed aloft and a horrid swelling traveled down the greenish yellow neck.

But even as it poised there for a second strike, it shrank in size by comparison with what now appeared out of the mist after it —a second green dragon's head fourfold larger and fantastically crested in red, orange and purple (for at first sight the rider seemed to be part of the monster). This head now drove forward as if it were that of the father of all dragons, sweeping up a black-rat swathe twice as wide as had the first and topping off its monster gobble with the two white rats behind the rat-carried black kitten.

It ended its first strike so suddenly (perhaps to avoid eating the kitten) that its parti-colored rider, who'd been waving his pike futilely, was hurled forward off its green head. The rider sailed low past the mainmast, knocking aside the Mingol striking at the Mouser, and skidded across the deck into the starboard rail.

The white rats let go of the kitten, which raced for the mainmast.

Then the two green heads, famished by their two days of small fishy pickings since their last real meal at the Rat Rocks, began methodically to sweep *Squid*'s deck clean of rats, avoiding humans for the most part, though not very carefully. And the rats, huddled in their mobs, did little to evade this dreaful mowing. Perhaps in their straining toward world-dominion they had grown just human and civilized enough to experience imaginative, unhelpful, freezing panic and to have acquired something of humanity's talent for inviting and enduring destruction. Perhaps they looked on the dragons' heads as the twin red maws of war and hell, into which they must throw themselves willy-nilly. At all events they were swept up by dozens and scores. All but three of the white rats were among those engulfed.

MEANWHILE the larger people aboard *Squid* faced up variously to the drastically altered situation.

Old Hisvin shook his fist and spat in the larger dragon's face when after its first gargantuan swallow it came questing toward him, as if trying to decide whether this bent black thing were (ugh!) a very queer man or (yum!) a very large rat. But

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when the stinking apparition kept coming on, Hisvin rolled deftly over the rail as if into bed and swiftly climbed down the rope ladder, fairly chittering in consternation, while Grig clung for dear life to the back of the black leather collar.

Hisvin's two Mingols picked themselves up and followed him, vowing to get back to their cozy cold steppes as soon as Mingolly possible.

Fafhrd and Karl Treuherz watced the melee from opposite sides of the middeck, the one bound by ropes, the other by outwearied astonishment.

Skwee and a white rat named Siss ran over the heads of their packed apathetic black fellows and hopped on the starboard rail. There they looked back. Siss blinked in horror. But Skwee, his black-plumed helmet pushed down over his left eye, menaced with his little sword and chittered defiance.

Frix ran to Hisvet and urged her to the starboard rail. As they neared the head of the rope ladder, Skwee went down it to make way for his empress, dragging Siss with him. Just then Hisvet turned like someone in a dream. The smaller dragon's head drove toward her viciously. Frix sprang in the way, arms wide, smiling, a little like a ballet dancer taking a curtain call. Perhaps it was the suddenness or seeming aggressiveness of her move that made the dragon sheer off, fangs clashing. The two girls climbed the rail.

Hisvet turned again, Cat's Claw's cut a bold red line across her face, and sighted her crossbow at the Mouser. There was the faintest silvery flash. Hisvet tossed the crossbow in the black sea and followed Frix down the ladder. The boathooks let go, the flapping black sail filled, and the black cutter faded into the mist.

The Mouser felt a little sting in his left temple, but he forgot it while whirling the last loops from his shoulders and ankles. Then he ran across the deck, disregarding the green heads lazily searching for last rat morsels, and cut Fafhrd's bonds.

ALL the rest of that night the two adventurers conversed with Karl Treuherz, telling each other fabulous things about each other's worlds, while Scylla's sated daughter slowly circled *Squid,* first one head sleeping and then the other. Talking was slow and uncertain work, even with the aid of the little Lankhmarese-German Dictionary for Space-Time Travelers, and neither party really believed a great deal of the other's tales, yet pretended to for friendship's sake.

"Do all men dress as grandly as you do in Tomorrow?" Fafhrd once asked, admiring the Ger-

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man's purple and orange garb.

"No, Hagenbeck just has his employees do it, to spread his monster zoo's fame," Karl Treuherz explained.

The last of the mist vanished just before dawn and they saw, silhouetted against the sea silvered by the sinking gibbous moon, the black ship of Karl Treuherz hovering not a bowshot west of *Squid*, its little lights twinkling softly.

The German shouted for joy, summoned his sleepy monster by thwacking his pike against the rail, swung astride the larger head, and swam off calling after him, "Auf Wiedersehen!"

Fafhrd had learned just enough Gibberish—German, during the night to know this meant, "Until we meet again."

When the monster and the German had swum below it, the space-time engine descended, somehow engulfing them. Then a little later the black ship vanished.

"It dove into the infinite waters toward Karl's Tomorrow bubble," the Gray Mouser affirmed confidently. "By Ning and by Sheel, the German's a master magician!"

Fafhrd blinked, frowned, and then simply shrugged. . .

The black kitten rubbed his ankle. Fafhrd lifted it gently to eye level, saying, "I wonder, kitten, if you're one of the Cats' Thirteen or else their small agent, sent to wake me when waking was needful?" The kitten smiled solemnly into Fafhrd's cruelly scratched and bitten face and purred.

Clear gray dawn spread across the waters of the Inner Sea, showing them first *Squid's* two boats crowded with men and Slinoor sitting dejected in the stern of the nearer but standing up with uplifted hand as he recognized the figures of the Mouser and Fafhrd; next Lukeen's war galley *Shark* and the three other grain ships *Tunny, Carp* and *Grouper;* lastly, small on the northern horizon, the green sails of two dragon-ships of Movarl.

The Mouser, running his left hand back through his hair, felt a short, straight, rounded ridge in his temple under the skin. He knew it was Hisvet's smooth silver dart, there to stay.

THE END

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The Garden of Fear

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

Introduction by SAM MOSKOWITZ

TO the select list of beloved names the world honors as "born story-tellers," that of Robert E. Howard incontestably belongs. He sold his first story to WEIRD TALES when he was 18; by the time he was 20 he was recognized as an outstanding member of a writing group already distinguished by such luminaries as H. P. Lovecraft, Henry S. Whitehead, Seabury Quinn, Frank Owen, E. Hoffman Price, Nictzin Dyalhis, Murray Leinster, and Frank Belknap Long. Howard's forte was violent action against the colorful backgrounds of pre-Biblical nations, all flavored with a touch of the unknown, the mystic, the occult. A master of characterization, Howard moved from success to success as his Solomon Kane, King Kull and eventually the unforgettable Conan created waves of popularity. All of his Conan stories have been preserved in hard covers, and new adventures in the series have been written by his literary acolytes.

The time and world of Conan has become a modern legend. Howard himself wrote The Hyborian Age, a "history" of the period in which the Conan stories are presented; he also mapped the fictional realms which serve as background for the stories. A national association known as The Hyborian Legion has come into being. A magazine devoted to facts and fancies concerning Howard titled AMRA, is now in its fifth year of publication. Tragically, Howard committed suicide at the age of 30, with his greatest potential yet to be realized.

Among the stories that relatively few of Howard's devotees have read is Garden of Fear. It first appeared in a semi-professional science-fantasy publication titled MARVEL TALES in 1934. The issue in which it was published, July-Aug., had a circulation of only several hundred. During World War II the story was published again by William H. Crawford in a paperback collection titled The Garden of Fear, by Robert E. Howard, and Other

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Stories of the Bizarre and Fantastic. *This book received spot distribution in only a few areas of the country and most people have never seen it.* The Garden of Fear *is one of Howard's most remarkable efforts, since it borders upon science fiction, yet combines Hunwulf, a character reminiscent of Conan, against a setting nightmarishly logical enough to sate the most jaded taste. This is an obscure Howard tale; but by any standard of science-fantasy, it is one of his best.*

ONCE I was Hunwulf, the Wanderer. I cannot explain my knowledge of this fact by any occult or esoteric means, nor shall I try. A man remembers his past life; I remember my past *lives*. Just as a normal individual recalls the shapes that were him in childhood, boyhood and youth, so I recall the shapes that have been James Allison in forgotten ages. Why this memory is mine I cannot say, any more than I can explain the myriad other phenomena of nature which daily confront me and every other mortal. But as I lie waiting for death to free me from my long disease, I see with a clear, sure sight the grand panorama of lives that trail out behind me. I see the men who have been me, and I see the beasts that have been me.

For my memory does not end at the coming of Man. How could it, when the Beast so shades into Man that there is no clearly divided line to mark the boundaries of bestiality? At this instant I see a dim twilight vista, among the gigantic trees of a primordial forest that never knew the tread of a leather-shod foot. I see a vast, shaggy, shambling bulk that lumbers clumsily yet swiftly, sometimes upright, sometimes on all fours. He delves under rotten logs for grubs and insects, and his small ears twitch continually. He lifts his head and bares yellow fangs. He is primordial, bestial, anthropoid; yet I recognize his kinship with the entity now called James Allison. Kinship? Say rather oneness. I am he; he is I. My flesh is soft and white and hairless; his is dark and tough and shaggy. Yet we are one, and already in his feeble, shadowed brain are beginning to stir and tingle the man-thoughts and the man dreams, crude, chaotic, fleeting, yet the basis for all the high and lofty visions men have dreamed in all the following ages.

Nor does my knowledge cease there. It goes back, back, down immemorial vistas I dare not follow, to abysses too dark and awful for the human mind to plumb. Yet even there I am aware of my identity, my indi-

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viduality. I tell you the individual is never lost, neither in the black pit from which we once crawled, blind, squalling and noisome, or in that eventual Nirvana in which we shall one day sink—which I have glimpsed afar off, shining as a blue twilight lake among the mountains of the stars.

But enough. I would tell you of Hunwulf. Oh, it was long, long ago! How long ago I dare not say. Why should I seek for paltry human comparisons to describe a realm indescribably, incomprehensibly distant? Since that age the earth has altered her contours not once but a dozen times, and whole cycles of mankind have completed their destinies.

I WAS Hunwulf, a son of the golden-haired Aesir, who, from the icy plains of shadowy Asgard, sent blue-eyed tribes around the world in century-long drifts to leave their trails in strange places. On one of those southward drifts I was born, for I never saw the homeland of my people, where the bulk of the Nordheimer still dwelt in their horse-hide tents among the snows.

I grew to manhood on that long wandering, to the fierce, sinewy, untamed manhood of the Aesir, who knew no gods but Ymir of the frost-rimed beard, and whose axes are stained with the blood of many nations. My thews were like woven steel cords. My yellow hair fell in a lion-like mane to my mighty shoulders. My loins were girt with leopard skin. With either hand I could wield my heavy flint-headed axe.

Year by year my tribe drifted southward, sometimes swinging in long arcs to east or west, sometimes lingering for months or years in fertile valleys or plains where the grass-eaters swarmed, but always forging slowly and inevitably southward. Sometimes our way led through vast and breathless solitudes that had never known a human cry; sometimes strange tribes disputed our course, and our trail passed over bloodstained ashes of butchered villages. And amidst this wandering, hunting and slaughtering, I came to full manhood and the love of Gudrun.

What shall I say of Gudrun? How describe color to the blind? I can say that her skin was whiter than milk, that her hair was living gold with the flame of the sun caught in it, that the supple beauty of her body would shame the dream that shaped the Grecian goddesses. But I cannot make you realize the fire and wonder that was Gudrun. You have no basis for comparison; you know womanhood only by the women of your epoch, who,

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beside her are like candles beside the glow of the full moon. Not for a millennium of millenniums have women like Gudrun walked the earth. Cleopatra, Thais, Helen of Troy, they were but pallid shadows of her beauty, frail mimicries of the blossom that blooms to full glory only in the primordial.

For Gudrun I forsook my tribe and my people, and went into the wilderness an exile and an outcast, with blood on my hands. She was of my race, but not of my tribe: a waif whom we found as a child wandering in a dark forest, lost from some wandering tribe of our blood. She grew up in the tribe, and when she came to the full ripeness of her glorious young womanhood, she was given to Heimdul the Strong, the mightiest hunter of the tribe.

But the dream of Gudrun was madness in my soul, a flame that burned eternally, and for her I slew Heimdul, crushing his skull with my flint-headed axe ere he could bear her to his horse-hide tent. And then follows our long flight from the vengeance of the tribe. Willingly she went with me, for she loved me with the love of the Aesir women, which is a devouring flame that destroys weakness. Oh, it was a savage age, when life was grim and bloodstained, and the weak died quickly. There was nothing mild or gentle about us; our passions were those of the tempest, the surge and impact of battle, the challenge of the lion. Our loves were as terrible as our hates.

And so I carried Gudrun from the tribe, and the killers were hot on our trail. For a night and a day they pressed us hard, until we swam a rising river, a roaring, foaming torrent that even the men of the Aesir dared not attempt. But in the madness of our love and recklessness we buffetted our way across, beaten and torn by the frenzy of the flood, and reached the further bank alive.

Then for many days we traversed upland forests haunted by tigers and leopards, until we came to a great barrier of mountains, blue ramparts climbing awesomely to the sky. Slope piled upon slope.

In those mountains we were assailed by freezing winds and hunger, and by giant condors which swept down upon us with a thunder of gigantic wings. In grim battles in the passes I shot away all my arrows and splintered my flint-headed spear, but at last we crossed the bleak backbone of the range and descending the southern slopes, came upon a village of mud huts among the cliffs inhabited by a peaceful, brown-skinned people who spoke a strange tongue and had strange customs. But they greeted us with the sign of peace, and

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brought us into their village, where they set meat and barley-bread and fermented milk before us, and squatted in a ring about us while we ate, and a woman slapped softly on a bowl-shaped tom-tom to do us honor.

WE had reached their village at dusk, and night fell while we feasted. On all sides rose the cliffs and peaks shouldering massively against the stars. The little cluster of mud huts and the tiny fires were drowned and lost in the immensity of the night. Gudrun felt the loneliness, the crowding desolation of the darkness, and she pressed close to me, her shoulder against my breast. But my axe was close at my hand, and I had never known the sensation of fear.

The little brown people squatted before us, men and women, and tried to talk to us with motions of their slender hands. Dwelling always in one place, in comparative security, they lacked both the strength and the uncompromising ferocity of the nomadic Aesir. Their hands fluttered with friendly gestures in the firelight.

I made them understand that we had come from the north, had crossed the backbone of the great mountain range, and that on the morrow it was our intention to descend into the green tablelands which we had glimpsed southward of the peaks. When they understood my meaning they set up a great cry shaking their heads violently, and beating madly on the drum. They were all so eager to impart something to me, and all waving their hands at once, that they bewildered rather than enlightened me. Eventually they did make me understand that they did not wish me to descend the mountains. Some menace lay to the south of the village, but whether of man or beast, I could not learn.

It was while they were all gesticulating and my whole attention was centered on their gestures, that the blow fell. The first intimation was a sudden thunder of wings in my ears; a dark shape rushed out of the night, and a great pinon dealt me a buffet over the head as I turned. I was knocked sprawling, and in that instant I heard Gudrun scream as she was torn from my side. Bounding up, quivering with a furious eagerness to rend and slay, I saw the dark shape vanish again into the darkness, a white, screaming, writhing figure trailing from its talons.

Roaring my grief and fury I caught up my axe and charged into the dark—then halted short, wild, desperate, knowing not which way to turn.

The little brown people had scattered, screaming, knocking sparks from their fires as they

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rushed over them in their haste to gain their huts, but now they crept out fearfully, whimpering like wounded dogs. They gathered around me and plucked at me with timid hands and chattered in their tongue while I cursed in sick impotency, knowing they wished to tell me something which I could not understand.

At last I suffered them to lead me back to the fire, and there the oldest man of the tribe brought forth a strip of cured hide, a clay pot of pigments, and a stick. On the hide he painted a crude picture of a winged thing carrying a white woman—oh, it was very crude, but I made out his meaning. Then all pointed southward and cried out loudly in their own tongue; and I knew that the menace they had warned me against was the thing that had carried off Gudrun. Until then I supposed that it had been one of the great mountain condors which had carried her away, but the picture the old man drew, in black paint, resembled a winging man more than anything else.

Then, slowly and laboriously, he began to trace something I finally recognized as a map—oh, yes, even in those dim days we had our primitive maps, though no modern man would be able to comprehend them so greatly different was our symbolism.

It took a long time; it was midnight before the old man had finished and I understood his tracings. But at last the matter was made clear. If I followed the course traced on the map, down the long narrow valley where stood the village, across a plateau, down a series of rugged slopes and along another valley, I would come to the place where lurked the being which had stolen my woman. At that spot the old man drew what looked like a misshappen hut, with many strange markings all about it in red pigments. Pointing to these, and again to me, he shook his head, with those loud cries that seemed to indicate peril among these people.

Then they tried to persuade me not to go, but afire with eagerness I took the piece of hide and pouch of food they thrust into my hands (they were indeed a strange people for that age), grasped my axe and set off in the moonless darkness. But my eyes were keener than a modern mind can comprehend, and my sense of direction was as a wolf's. Once the map was fixed in my mind, I could have thrown it away and come unerring to the place I sought but I folded it and thrust it into my girdle.

I TRAVELLED at my best speed through the starlight, taking no heed of any beasts that might be seeking their prey—

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cave bear or saber-toothed tiger. At times I heard gravel slide under stealthy padded paws; I glimpsed fierce yellow eyes burning in the darkness, and caught sight of shadowy, skulking forms. But I plunged on recklessly, in too desperate a mood to give the path to any beast however fearsome.

I traversed the valley, climbed a ridge and came out on a broad plateau, gashed with ravines and strewn with boulders. I crossed this and in the darkness before dawn commenced my climb down the treacherous slopes. They seemed endless, falling away in a long steep incline until their feet were lost in darkness. But I went down recklessly, not pausing to unsling the rawhide rope I carried about my shoulders, trusting to my luck and skill to bring me down without a broken neck.

And just as dawn was touching the peaks with a white glow, I dropped into a broad valley, walled by stupendous cliffs. At that point it was wide from east to west, but the cliffs converged toward the lower end, giving the valley the appearance of a great fan, narrowing swiftly toward the south.

The floor was level, traversed by a winding stream. Trees grew thinly; there was no underbrush, but a carpet of tall grass, which at that time of year were somewhat dry. Along the stream where the green lush grew, wandered mammoths, hairy mountains of flesh and muscle.

I gave them a wide berth, giants too mighty for me to cope with, confident in their power, and afraid of only one thing on earth. They bent forward their great ears and lifted their trunks menacingly when I approached too near, but they did not attack me. I ran swiftly among the trees, and the sun was not yet above the eastern ramparts which its rising edged with golden flame, when I came to the point where the cliffs converged. My night-long climb had not affected my iron muscles. I felt no weariness; my fury burned unabated. What lay beyond the cliffs I could not know; I ventured no conjecture. I had room in my brain only for red wrath and killing-lust.

The cliffs did not form a solid wall. That is, the extremities of the converging palisades did not meet, leaving a notch or gap a few hundred feet wide; the stream flowed through it, and trees grew thickly there. I passed this notch, which was not much longer than it was wide, and emerged into a second valley, or rather into a continuance of the same valley which broadened out again beyond the pass.

The cliffs slanted away swiftly to east and west, to form a giant rampart that marched clear

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around the valley in the shape of a vast oval. It formed a blue rim all around the valley without a break except for a glimpse of the clear sky that seemed to mark another notch at the southern end. The inner valley was shaped much like a great bottle, with two necks.

The neck by which I had entered was crowded with trees, which grew densely for several hundred yards, when they gave way abruptly to a field of crimson flowers. And a few hundred yards beyond the edges of the trees, I saw a strange structure.

I MUST speak of what I saw not alone as Hunwulf, but as James Allison as well. For Hunwulf only vaguely comprehended the things he saw, and, as Hunwulf, he could not describe them at all. I, as Hunwulf, knew nothing of architecture. The only man-built dwelling I had ever seen had been the horse-hide tents of my people, and the thatched mud huts of the barley people—and other people equally primitive.

So as Hunwulf I could only say that I looked upon a great hut the construction of which was beyond my comprehension. But I, James Allison, know that it was a tower, some seventy feet in height, of a curious green stone, highly polished, and of a substance that created the illusion of semi-translucency. It was cylindrical, and, as near as I could see, without doors or windows. The main body of the building was perhaps sixty feet in height, and from its center rose a smaller tower that completed its full stature. This tower, being much inferior in girth to the main body of the structure, was thus surrounded by a sort of gallery, with a crenellated parapet, and was furnished with both doors, curiously arched, and windows, thickly barred as I could see, even from where I stood.

That was all. No evidence of human occupancy. No sign of life in all the valley. But it was evident that this castle was what the old man of the mountain village had been trying to draw, and I was certain that in it I would find Gundrun—if she still lived.

Beyond the tower I saw the glimmer of a blue lake into which the stream, following the curve of the western wall, eventually flowed. Lurking amid the trees I glared at the tower and at the flowers surrounding it on all sides, growing thick along the walls and extending for hundreds of yards in all directions. There were trees at the other end of the valley, near the lake; but no trees grew among the flowers.

They were not like any plants I had ever seen. They grew close together, almost touching each other. They were some four feet

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in height, with only one blossom on each stalk, a blossom larger than a man's head, with broad, fleshy petals drawn close together. These petals were a livid crimson, the hue of an open wound. The stalks were thick as a man's wrist, colorless, almost transparent. The poisonously green leaves were shaped like spearheads, drooping on long snaky stems. Their whole aspect was repellent, and I wondered what their denseness concealed.

For all my wild-born instincts were roused in me. I felt lurking peril, just as I had often sensed the ambushed lion before my external senses recognized him. I scanned the dense blossoms closely, wondering if some great serpent lay coiled among them. My nostrils expanded as I quested for a scent, but the wind was blowing away from me. But there was *something decidedly unnatural* about that vast garden. Though the north wind swept over it, not a blossom stirred, not a leaf rustled; they hung motionless, sullen, like birds of prey with drooping heads, and I had a strange feeling that they were watching me like living things.

It was like a landscape in a dream: on either hand the blue cliffs lifting against the cloud-fleeced sky; in the distance the dreaming lake; and that fantastic green tower rising in the midst of that livid crimson field.

And there was something else: in spite of the wind that was blowing away from me, I caught a scent, a charnel-house reek of death and decay and corruption that rose from the blossoms.

Then suddenly I crouched closer in my covert. There was life and movement on the castle. A figure emerged from the tower, and coming to the parapet, leaned upon it and looked out across the valley. It was a man, but such a man as I had never dreamed of, even in nightmares.

He was tall, powerful, black with the hue of polished ebony; but the feature which made a human nightmare of him was the batlike wings which folded on his shoulders. I knew they were wings: the fact was obvious and indisputable.

I, James Allison, have pondered much on that phenomenon which I witnessed through the eyes of Hunwolf. Was that winged man merely a freak, an isolated example of distorted nature, dwelling in solitude and immemorial desolation? Or was he a survival of a forgotten race, which had risen, reigned and vanished before the coming of man as we know him? The little brown people of the hills might have told me, but we had no speech in common. Yet I am inclined to the latter theory. Winged men are not uncommon in mythology; they are met with

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in the folk lore of many nations and many races. As far back as man may go in myth, chronicle and legend, he finds tales of harpies and winged gods, angels and demons. Legends are distorted shadows of pre-existent realities. I believe that once a race of winged black men ruled a pre-Adamite world, and that I, Hunwulf, met the last survivor of that race in the valley of the red blossoms.

These thoughts I think as James Allison, with my modern knowledge which is as imponderable as my modern ignorance.

I HUNWULF, indulged in no such speculations. Modern skepticism was not a part of my nature, nor did I seek to rationalize what seemed not to coincide with a natural universe. I acknowledged no gods but Ymir and his daughters, but I did not doubt the existence—as demons—of other deities, worshipped by other races. Supernatural beings of all sorts fitted into my conception of life and the universe. I no more doubted the existence of dragons, ghosts, fiends and devils than I doubted the existence of lions and buffaloes and elephants. I accepted this freak of nature as a supernatural demon and did not worry about its origin or source. Nor was I thrown into a panic of superstitious fear. I was a son of Asgard, who feared neither man nor devil, and I had more faith in the crushing power of my flint axe than in the spells of priests or the incantations of sorcerers.

But I did not immediately rush into the open and charge the tower. The wariness of the wild was mine, and I saw no way to climb the castle. The winged man needed no doors on the side, because he evidently entered at the top, and the slick surface of the walls seemed to defy the most skillful climber. Presently a way of getting upon the tower occurred to me, but I hesitated, waiting to see if any other winged people appeared, though I had an unexplainable feeling that he was the only one of his kind in the valley—possibly in the world. While I crouched among the trees and watched, I saw him lift his elbows from the parapet and stretch lithely, like a great cat. Then he strode across the circular gallery and entered the tower. A muffled cry rang out on the air which caused me to stiffen, though even so I realized that it was not the cry of a woman. Presently the black master of the castle emerged, dragging a smaller figure with him—a figure which writhed and struggled and cried out piteously. I saw that it was a small brown man, much like those of the mountain village. Captured, I did not doubt, as Gudrun had been captured.

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He was like a child in the hands of his huge foe. The black man spread broad wings and rose over the parapet, carrying his captive as a condor might carry a sparrow. He soared out over the field of blossoms, while I crouched in my leafy retreat, glaring in amazement.

The winged man, hovering in mid-air, voiced a strange weird cry; and it was answered in horrible fashion. A shudder of awful life passed over the crimson field beneath him. The great red blossoms trembled, opened, spreading their fleshy petals like the mouths of serpents. Their stalks seemed to elongate, stretching upward eagerly. Their broad leaves lifted and vibrated with a curious lethal whirring, like the singing of a rattlesnake. A faint but flesh-crawling hissing sounded over all the valley. The blossoms gasped, straining upward. And with a fiendish laugh, the winged man dropped his writhing captive.

With the scream of a lost soul the brown man hurtled downward, crashing among the flowers. And with a rustling hiss, they were on him. Their thick flexible stalks arched like the necks of serpents, their petals closed on his flesh. A hundred blossoms clung to him like the tentacles of an octopus, smothering and crushing him down. His shrieks of agony came muffled; he was completely hidden by the hissing, threshing flowers. Those beyond reach swayed and writhed furiously as if seeking to tear up their roots in their eagerness to join their brothers. All over the field the great red blossoms leaned and strained toward the spot where the grisly battle went on. The shrieks sank lower and lower and lower, and ceased. A dread silence reigned over the valley. The black man flapped his way leisurely back to the tower, and vanished within it.

THEN presently the blossoms detached themselves one by one from their victim who lay very white and still. Aye, his whiteness was more than that of death; he was like a wax image, a staring effigy from which every drop of blood had been sucked. And a startling transmutation was evident in the flowers directly about him. Their stalks no longer colorless; they were swollen and dark red, like transparent bamboos filled to the bursting with fresh blood.

Drawn by an insatiable curiosity, I stole from the trees and glided to the very edge of the red field. The blossoms hissed and bent toward me, spreading their petals like the hood of a roused cobra. Selecting one fartherest from its brothers, I severed the stalk with a stroke of my axe,

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and the thing tumbled to the ground, writhing like a beheaded serpent.

When its struggles ceased I bent over it in wonder. The stalk was not hollow as I had supposed —that is, hollow like a dry bamboo. It was traversed by a network of thread-like veins, some empty and some exuding a colorless sap. The stems which held the leaves to the stalk were remarkably tenacious and pliant, and the leaves themselves were edged with curved spines, like sharp hooks.

Once those spines were sunk in the flesh, the victim would be forced to tear up the whole plant by the roots if he escaped.

The petals were each as broad as my hand, and as thick as a prickly pear, and on the inner side covered with innumerable tiny mouths, not larger than the head of a pin. In the center, where the pistil should be, there was a barbed spike, of a substance like thorn, and narrow channels between the four serrated edges.

From my investigations of this horrible travesty of vegetation, I looked up suddenly, just in time to see the winged man appear again on the parapet. He did not seem particularly surprised to see me. He shouted in his unknown tongue and made a mocking gesture, while I stood statue-like, gripping my axe. Presently he turned and entered the tower as he had done before; and as before, he emerged with a captive. My fury and hate were almost submerged by the flood of joy that Gudrun was alive.

In spite of her supple strength, which was that of a she-panther, the black man handled Gudrun as easily as he had handled the brown man. Lifting her struggling white body high above his head, he displayed her to me and yelled tauntingly. Her golden hair streamed over her white shoulders as she fought vainly, crying to me in the terrible extremity of her fright and horror.

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Not lightly was a woman of the Aesir reduced to cringing terror. I measured the depths of her captor's diabolism by her frenzied cries.

But I stood motionless. If it would have saved her, I would have plunged into that crimson morass of hell, to be hooked and pierced and sucked white by those fiendish flowers. But that would help her none. My death would merely leave her without a defender. So I stood silent while she writhed and whimpered, and the black man's laughter sent red waves of madness surging across my brain. Once he made as if to cast her down among the flowers, and my iron control almost snapped and sent me plunging into that red sea of hell. But it was only a gesture. Presently he dragged her back to the tower and tossed her inside. Then he turned back to the parapet, rested his elbows upon it, and fell to watching me. Apparently he was playing with us as a cat plays with a mouse before he destroys it.

But while he watched, I turned my back and strode into the forest. I, Hunwulf, was not a thinker, as modern men understand the term. I lived in an age where emotions were translated by the smash of a flint axe rather than by emanations of the intellect. Yet I was not the senseless animal the black man evidently supposed me to be. I had a human brain, whetted by the eternal struggle for existence and supremacy.

I KNEW I could not cross that red strip that banded the castle, alive. Before I could take a half dozen steps a score of barbed spikes would be thrust into my flesh, their avid mouths sucking the blood from my veins to feed their demoniac lust. Even my tigerish strength would not avail to hew a path through them.

The winged man did not follow. Looking back, I saw him still lounging in the same position. When I, as James Allison, dream again the dreams of Hunwulf, that image is etched in my mind that gargoyle figure with elbows propped on the parapet, like a medieval devil brooding on the battlements of hell.

I passed through the straits of the valley and came into the vale beyond where the trees thinned and the mammoths lumbered along the stream. Beyond the herd I stopped and drawing a pair of flints into my pouch, stooped and struck a spark in the dry grass. Running swiftly from chosen place to place, I set a dozen fires, in a great semi-circle. The north wind caught them, whipped them into eager life, drove them before it. In a few moments a rampart of flame was sweeping down the valley.

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The mammoths ceased their feeding, lifted their great ears and bellowed alarm. In all the world they feared only fire. They began to retreat southward, the cows hearding the calves before them, bulls trumpeting like the blast of Judgement Day. Roaring like a storm the fire rushed on, and the mammoths broke and stampeded, a crushing hurricane of flesh, a thundering earthquake of hurtling bone and muscle. Trees splintered and went down before them, the ground shook under their headlong tread. Behind them came the racing fire and on the heels of the fire came I, so closely that the smouldering earth burnt the moose-hide sandals off my feet.

Through the narrow neck they thundered, levelling the dense thickets like a giant scythe. Trees were torn up by the roots; it was as if a tornado had ripped through the pass.

With a deafening thunder of pounding feet and trumpeting, they stormed across the sea of red blossoms. Those devilish plants might have even pulled down and destroyed a single mammoth; but under the impact of the whole herd, they were no more than common flowers. The maddened titans crashed through and over them, battering them to shreds, hammering, stamping them into the earth which grew soggy with their juice.

I trembled for an instant, fearing the brutes would not turn aside for the castle, and dubious of even it being able to withstand that battering ram concussion. Evidently the winged man shared my fears, for he shot up from the tower and raced off through the sky toward the lake. But one of the bulls butted head-on into the wall, was shunted off the smooth curving surface, caromed into the one next to him, and the herd split and roared by the tower on either hand, so closely their hairy sides rasped against it. They thundered on through the red field toward the distant lake.

The fire, reaching the edge of the trees, was checked; the smashed sappy fragments of the red flowers would not burn. Trees, fallen or standing, smoked and burst into flame, and burning branches showered around me as I ran through the trees and out into the gigantic swath the charging herd had cut through the livid field.

As I ran I shouted to Gudrun and she answered me. Her voice was muffled, and accompanied by a hammering on something. The winged man had locked her in the tower.

As I came under the castle wall, treading on remnants of red petals and snaky stalks, I unwound my rawhide rope, swung it, and sent its loop shooting upward to catch on one of the mer-

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lons of the crenellated parapet. Then I went up it, hand over hand, gripping the rope between my toes, bruising my knuckles and elbows against the sheer wall as I swung about.

I was within five feet of the parapet when I was galvanized by the beat of wings above my head. The black man shot out of the air and landed on the gallery. I got a good look at him as he leaned over the parapet. His features were straight and regular; there was no suggestion of the negroid about him. His eyes were slanted slits, and his teeth gleamed in a savage grin of hate and triumph. Long, long he had ruled the valley of the red blossoms, levelling tribute of human lives from the miserable tribes of the hills, for writhing victims to feed the carnivorous half-bestial flowers which were his subjects and protectors. And now I was in his power, my fierceness, and craft gone for naught. A stroke of the crooked dagger in his hand and I would go hurtling to my death. Somewhere Gudrun, seeing my peril, was screaming like a wild thing, and then a door crashed with a splintering of wood.

THE black man, intent upon his gloating, laid the keen edge of his dagger on the rawhide strand —then a strong white arm locked about his neck from behind, and he was jerked violently backward. Over his shoulder I saw the beautiful face of Gudrun her hair standing on end, her eyes dilated with terror and fury.

With a roar he turned in her grasp, tore loose her clinging arms and hurled her against the tower with such force that she lay half stunned. Then he turned again to me, but in that instant I had swarmed up and over the parapet, and leaped upon the gallery, unslinging my axe.

For an instant he hesitated, his wings half-lifted, his hand poising his dagger, as if uncertain whether to fight or take to the air. He was a giant in stature, with muscles standing out in corded ridges all over him, but he hesitated, as uncertain as a man when confronted by a wild beast.

I did not hesitate. With a deep-throated roar I sprang, swinging my axe with all my giant strength. With a strangled cry he threw up his arms; but down between them the axe blade plunged, and blasted his head to red ruin.

I wheeled toward Gudrun; and struggling to her knees, she threw her white arms about me in a desperate clasp of love and terror, staring awedly to where lay the winged lord of the valley, the crimson pulp that had been his head drowned in a puddle of blood and brains.

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I had often wished that it were possible to draw these various lives of mine together in one body, combining the experiences of Hunwulf with the knowledge of James Allison. Could that be so, Hunwulf would have gone through the ebony door which Gudrun in her desperate strength had shattered, into that weird chamber he glimpsed through the ruined panels, with fantastic furnishing, and shelves heaped with rolls of parchment. He would have unrolled those scrolls and pored over their characters until he deciphered them, and read, perhaps, the chronicles of that weird race whose last survivor he had just slain. Surely the tale was stranger than an opium dream, and marvelous as the story of lost Atlantis.

But Hunwulf had no such curiosity. To him the tower, the ebony furnished chamber and the rolls of parchment were meaningless, inexplicable emanations of sorcery, whose significance lay only in their diabolism. Though the solution of mystery lay under his fingers, he was as far removed from it as James Allison, millenniums yet unborn.

To me, Hunwulf, the castle was but a monstrous trap, concerning which I had but one emotion, and that a desire to escape from it as quickly as possible.

With Gudrun clinging to me I slid to the ground, then with a dexterous flip I freed my rope and wound it; and after that we went hand and hand along the path made by the mammoths, now vanishing in the distance, toward the blue lake at the southern end of the valley and the notch in the cliffs beyond it.

THE END

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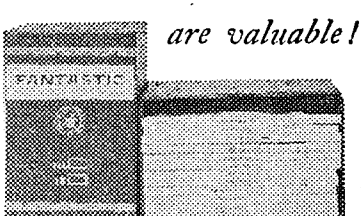

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the PROBLEM was LUBRICATION

By
DAVID R. BUNCH

It was an old story: two men, one girl, jealousy, the fight—and then some brain coming along to reap the rewards. A wry tale of automation to the Nth degree.

I GUESS it kept him hopping, there were so many holes. And I guess it was mostly hard work. But to me, as I watched this automation through the observation slit, it was somewhat diverting to see, among all the somber squatting machines with a fixed place in the line, one that could stand up tall and take off all around the floor. He wasn't a robot really, and actually I guess he couldn't take off and run all around the floor just wherever he wanted. But the metal track he was on carried him to all parts of the work area in order for him to reach every one of the squatty fixed machines, and there were occasional side trips up to the reload place. In comparison with the fixed ones this fellow had it good, I thought.

His official name was Lubro. Or so it said in gay red letters on a shiny metal plate riveted to his rear. The day I watched Lubro they were turning out millions of little metal disks destined for some important places in some important engines, and the machines doing the work were running hot. And here would come Lubro, smooth and docile on his track, until he reached a machine that was running hot turning out the disks. The machine would flip little lids up at Lubro's approach and Lubro in response would whang jointed sections of tubing out of himself and the ends of those tubes would find their way into the holes where the lids had flipped up. And while the machines worked on as though nothing were hap-

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pening Lubro would stand there vibrating on his track and eject oil into the holes according to some clocklike mechanism in him. And as the tempo of production increased, Lubro ran faster and faster on his track and whanged metal tubing out of himself oftener and oftener and came up to the reload place time and again. But it seemed to me he was happy at his work, although that could have been merely my imagining because of the great contrast between a Lubro and a machine that squatted on the floor hour by hour and turned out the quota time and again with, to console her, nothing but the small diversion of flipping her lids up for Lubro.

All in all, everything was going well here at automation it seemed to me, and Lubro was taking care of it, I thought, all right. But maybe he was running hot. At any rate, some Central Brain in the place made the decision and another upright thing with a clocklike mechanism in him and the power to eject flexible tubing out of himself came in to run on the tracks with Lubro. The Oiler, his name was. I guess the Central Brain thought The Oiler and Lubro could stay out of each others way all right; one could be taking care of it in the south end, say, while the other was over north doing it; or one could be functioning on the west side while the other was shooting for lids in the east section of the work area maybe. But the truth is they didn't—they couldn't—stay out of each others way for long. In the first place, I think Lubro was a little jealous, or maybe resentful is the better word, of The Oiler. For the very presence of The Oiler made it clear how the Central Brain felt. He felt that Lubro couldn't handle the job. Then too, no getting around it, The Oiler, big dark and cocky, was in Lubro's territory.

But as for production, there was an increase in it, no denying that. Especially was there more work done by certain of the newer machines in the central part of the work area. And it was one of these very machines that caused the flare-up. She was a new blonde machine without yet the grime of much servicing on her oil lids. And she squatted there, seemingly as innocent as a piece of the floor, and tooled her disks. But Lubro noticed it, and I noticed it too. Twice within the hour, when Lubro glided up, she kept her oil lids closed as though she were running cool as a bucket of grease. But when The Oiler came in at almost the same time from the opposite side of the work area her lids flew open as though she were filled with fire.

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And The Oiler ejected the tubes, according to the clocklike mechanism in him, and the tubes found the holes where the quivering lids hovered open, and he oiled the machine that indeed was not running cool; it was his job.

LUBRO caught him at the top of the reload area. It was unethical. The Oiler was taking on oil, siphoning it from Central Supply into the can of his lower body. And Lubro should not have come in to the reload at the same time; there was but the one straight track in to the reload and no spur track for passing. But Lubro did come in. And the cocky Oiler stood nonchalantly siphoning oil until his can was full. Then he turned in that way he had, brazen, precise, sure, and he headed back for the work area as though it were understood that Lubro, being wrong, would retrace and let him through. Lubro would not! Lubro braced. Lubro hit him, hit him hard and middle-high and bounced him ten feet up the track. Lubro hit him again when The Oiler came within range. The Oiler closed and struck back; The Oiler hit twice in quick succession. The two oil cans stood toe-to-toe at the bottom of the reload area and exchanged blows. They rattled each others skin sections and clobbered each others joints. Rivets flew. Clocklike mechanisms were upset. They fought until it seemed in doubt that either one or the other would prove himself the better oil can.

Then the tide turned, as tides will, and Lubro got his chance. Because his clocklike mechanism was considerably upset by the hard blows he had taken, and possibly partly because he had just taken the reload, here at this strangest and most illogical of times one of The Oiler's tubelike sections popped out. Oil sprayed the area, and Lubro rammed in to wham the embarrassed oil can on the tube and spin him about until The Oiler was quite spun off the track. And there he lay, vanquished and bleeding oil, and presently all his other tubes flopped out and lay there limp and empty in plain sight, and The Oiler was a very sorry sight indeed. And because he had taken many hard blows himself, and partly, no doubt, in sheer exuberance over his victory, something got into Lubro's thinking and caused him to pull a very silly and shabby stunt. He ejected all his tubing sections to the very farthest limits they would go and sprayed The Oiler until he, Lubro, was quite empty of oil.

The Central Brain was jumping-mad in his clock, crazy-mad at Lubro and The Oiler. From

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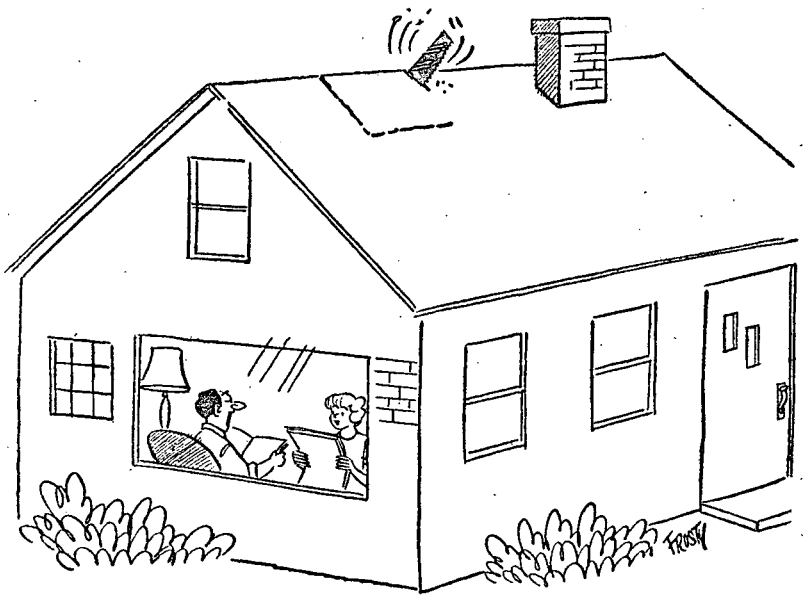
these silly oil cans he had had quite enough, really he had. He immediately called a meeting of all the Junior Brains, and they all left their clocks and sat around a big polished disk of metal with a hole in the center of it and the Central Brain in the hole until they had all quite decided what to do. There was just one logical answer. Tear up the tracks, build a Lubro or an Oiler stationary for each squatty fixed machine and service these automatic tube ejectors from a Central Supply, using as many self-motion helicopters as would be required.

The Brains, having won again, having figured it out, resumed their clocklike places along the walls. And while they all agreed that automation had its bugs, yes it did, really it was quite the coming thing, yes it was.

THE END



"What's this I hear about Junior wanting to become an astronomer?"

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Are You Now or HAVE YOU EVER BEEN?

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS

If time travel is ever again used as the theme of a science-fantasy story, after this wild Sharkey epic in which our hero runs the risk of having a date-palm oasis sprouting in his stomach—well, we'll be very much surprised.

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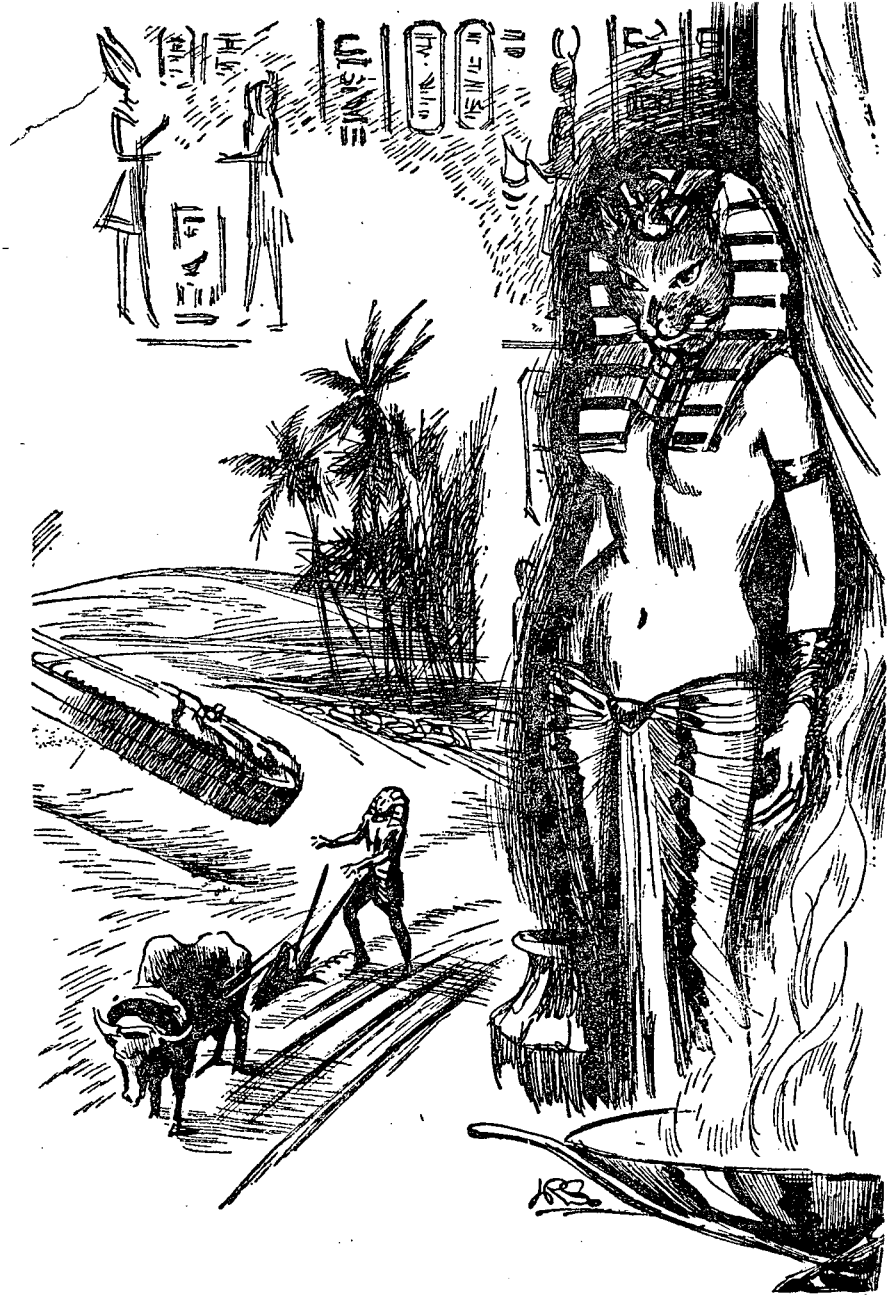

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THE REAL difficulty in building a time machine," said Harry Lindstrom, "is using the proper materials."

Olga looked at him with a frown, and set her drink down carefully on the low table that lay between them in the firelight. "That sounds almost like a truism, Harry," she said, with a pale shadow of a smile on her smooth lips. "But I know you better than that. What do you mean?"

Harry leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head, looking sideways with a friendly grin at his lab assistant, lately turned fond friend, though not yet lover. He lifted his heels onto the edge of the table, then crossed his legs at the ankles. "The problem, Olga, seems to be that we can't build a machine without an outside."

"The Klein bottle—" she began, but Harry grimaced and held up his hand for silence.

"Please! Not that!" he chuckled ruefully. "I know all about Klein bottles and Moebius strips. In theory, they seem to defy the laws of three-dimensional construction, by having, respectively, only one surface and only one surface-and-edge. But that's a mere matter of definition, not of actuality. Give either one to a small child, and he'll be furiously adamant in his declaration that there *is* an inside-*and*-outside to the bottle, and *two* surfaces and edges to the strip, no matter how long we lecture him about the ingenious twists that make apparently dissimilar locales continuations of each other. Nope, no help there at all."

"Ah well—" Olga yawned and stretched like a cat in the dancing light of the orange flames devouring the pine logs. "It's not as though we really *needed* a time machine . . ."

Harry snorted and sat up. "All very well to be blithe about it, young lady. But if I don't come up with something soon, the university may well renege on their grant, and then what will you do for employment?"

"I could get married," said Olga, but only her voice was facetious; her eyes were intently centered on his face.

Harry felt the stare, and avoided returning it. "I hope you find a man in better financial straits than *I'm* in! A pawn of the whims of a board of directors! Even this cottage is a loan. If I don't come up with anything in the next month or so, I may very well be left standing here on the mountainside when the finance company whisks away everything from the quaint log walls to the bearskin rug on the hearth."

"I'd be standing beside you," Olga ventured, almost timidly.

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This time, Harry did return her gaze.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Olga. You know I'm in no position to—"

He stopped speaking as Olga rose from her chair, came around the short table, and without ceremony sat herself upon his lap and encircled his neck with her slim strong arms. "You are now," she remarked, smiling.

With an effort, Harry kept his hands locked behind his head. "Much as I enjoy dalliance, Miss Garth—" He stressed her surname in a last-ditch attempt to restore their erstwhile employer-employee relationship. "—I think this is hardly the time—"

His mind suddenly got back on its accustomed track.

"And speaking of *time*, Olga —That's what we were given this cottage and attached laboratory for: We're supposed to slave day and night to milk some of its secrets from the cosmos."

"Cosmos-schmosmos," said Olga. "Kiss me."

Harry's arms came down from their position behind his head, and wrapped cautiously about Olga. "We'll regret this when the university sends someone to see how we're doing . . ."

"Just don't wipe off the lipstick, and he'll *know* how we're doing," said Olga.

"What lipstick?" said Harry.

Olga showed him.

Within a few minutes, Harry's enthusiasm began to surpass hers. Then, woman-like, she retreated into her diffident shell, and jumped to her feet. "About this no-outside thing, on the time machine," she said. "What did you mean?"

"What time machine?" said Harry, his hands reaching out for her. Olga retreated nimbly beyond the table once more, and sat in the other wingbacked chair, her gaze as wary as that of an oyster on the half-shell.

"Fun is fun," she said, "but we came up here to work."

Harry slumped back, deflated. "Then what was all that fleeting passion about?"

Olga smiled gently. "I had to find something out," she said. "I found out. Now we ought to concentrate on our job."

Chagrined, Harry poured himself another drink, then, instead of sipping it, he stared at its amber coruscations as he held the glass between his eyes and the fireplace. "You've shriveled a lot of self-esteem from my ego," he said sullenly.

"Don't be silly," said Olga. "When I found out what I wanted to find out, my findings were on the positive side."

Harry quirked an eyebrow in her direction. "Oh?"

"You *do* like me as a woman," she said simply. "Now that I don't have that nagging doubt

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hanging over me, I can concentrate on my work."

"But can *I* concentrate on *mine!?*" muttered Harry.

"Of course you can," she said smartly. "You have a dual goal, now: The time machine and me."

"Boy," said Harry, with a short laugh and headshake, "I detect no deflation of *your* ego!"

"If a woman knows she can charm a man, she is very rarely humble about it," said Olga. "Now, get back to the machine, and tell me what you were talking about before."

As a matter of fact, Olga had a glimmering of what he meant, but she was pretty sure that stressing his work would keep him amicable, but not overly amorous. Being a woman is sometimes a ticklish proposition; if you make yourself too attractive to men, your reputation is in danger, but if you make yourself too unattractive, your future turns bleaker than the landscaping of the moon. You had to keep men coming after you without ever letting them arrive till you had rice in your hair and a license in your purse.

Harry took a sip of his drink, set it down, and proceeded to tell her his theory of the main problem of time-machine construction. He had originally been given the grant by the university when, as a minor physics assistant, he had stumbled upon a unique equation that allowed a person to travel in time by the simple expedient of ceasing to travel in space.

In normal, everyday existence in the universe, nobody ever stops moving. Even a man who lies quiet as a mouse atop a rigid mountain of granite is moving. It cannot be helped. The planet turns eastward on its axis at approximately one thousand miles per hour. Could this be halted, there is still the planet's orbital motion around the sun, at just under a million miles per day. And even if *this* could be stopped, with the planet lying quietly at its ninety-three-million miles from the sun, there is still the sun's fantastic gallop across the milky way. And even if *this*— But you get the idea. Nobody, but nobody, can actually come to a complete halt.

Well, time is a measurement of this velocity, this change. If there were no change, there could be no sense of "before" or "after", and hence no time. You could lie still, and get no older. Of course, it would be pretty dull, but it would be interesting enough for awhile.

However, to travel *back* in time, you would have to make *negative* motion. And that's not easy. To freeze into your moment of time, you would simply

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have to freeze into your section of space. But to move in time, toward the future, you simply moved along with space, growing older as the sun rose and set and the Earth swung swiftly about the sun.

Harry Lindstrom's machine let a person *un*-move.

Un-movement is practically impossible to explain. The nearest thing to it is a film running backward. As a person would ordinarily send energy into a muscle to lift an arm, thus using movement, Harry's machine would allow a person to *take* energy from a muscle in order to drop the arm. All the normal functions reversed. Instead of expending energy, a man in the grip of Harry's time-field would absorb energy, and reverse. This, it turned out, had an annoying drawback. The man's age also reversed, so a man of twenty could only be sent back a few years, else he would return to infancy, some two decades in the past, and be of no scientific use whatsoever. Harry, on finding this out, tried sending some elderly people back. He sent a ninety-year-old man back sixty-five years, hoping that the twenty-five-year-old to which the man had reverted could be a fine scientific observer. However, the old man, finding himself in the prime of his youth again, just stepped out of the time-field, and when Harry readjusted the dials to bring him back, all that returned to the present was a note saying "Thanks a million".

Harry, checking newspapers of sixty-five years back, was able to find a small article describing the abrupt manifestation of a young man on the site where the lab of the university would later be built, a young man who yelled something like "Whoopee!", scrawled a note upon a piece of paper, and rushed off into the crowd which had gathered. A policeman, attempting to get the note as evidence, said that it had vanished before he could get to it.

"Good thing, too," Harry had decided, "else I would have an ancient relic of a policeman on my hands, changed by his time-trip to angry senility." So the time-field was out.

Harry, however, had convinced the board of directors that he was "on" to something, with his showing of the note and the newspaper, and they had awarded him this mountain retreat to conduct further investigations. So far, things looked bad. And the reason was that—

"—although I can build a shell about a time-traveler, so that he remains at his age-of-departure, much as a man in a submarine carries along his own air and food, unaffected by the trip un-

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der the seas, the machine itself is subject to the laws of age," said Harry, finishing his drink.

Olga nodded sympathetically. "So you think that a machine would *de*-age, even if the traveler within it didn't?"

Harry bobbed his head glumly. "Exactly."

"But," said Olga with a pretty frown, "that should make no difference. After all, if you make the machine out of iron, that iron has existed on the planet for millions of years. A *metal* can't revert in age."

Harry smiled wryly. "No, you're quite right, it can't. What is iron now was iron when the Earth's crust was formed. True. However, what is a *machine* now was only a machine when we built it. Last night, *I* tried going back in time—"

"Harry!" gasped Olga, jumping to her feet. "You might have been killed! How dare you try it without me along!"

"That's just *it!*" he snapped, his fury forcing her back into her chair without his demanding it of her. "I *thought* it might be dangerous, and I didn't want you along. This project is *my* invention, *my* risk, not yours."

"But—"she said shakily, "what happened? Did you go?"

"Sure," he said bitterly. "I zoomed backward in time to the astounding distance of fifteen seconds."

Olga blinked. "Is that all?"

"Naturally," said Harry. "Because the machine had only been plugged into the wall dynamos for fifteen seconds before I tried it. I got back that far in time, and the power went off as the plug unplugged itself."

"Oh dear," said Olga. "Maybe a self-contained power unit—"

"Don't think that didn't occur to *me!*" he scowled. "I then jerrybuilt one, out of an old automobile battery, pulled the wires inside with myself, and started the motor."

"Well?" said Olga, eagerly.

"That time, I went back *two hours!*" he grunted. "Because two hours was the period of time since I had first dropped the door into place. The instant I reached that point, the door flew off the machine, and luckily severed a wire, since I was no longer isolated from the time-stream I was traveling in, and my age would have started going down to childhood."

"Brrr!" Olga shivered. "I'm glad that thing cut the power! I might have come into the lab and found a small male baby crawling around in your lab jacket!"

"Don't be dense!" snapped her boss. "That baby would be back in *time*, not just in size! It would be crawling around this bare mountainside about twenty-nine years ago, before this cottage was even built."

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Surprisingly, Olga brightened. "But there's your answer, Harry!" she said happily. "About the grant, I mean. If a man from the university *does* show up complaining, all you and I have to do is jump into the machine, and we can move back in time at least as far as yesterday when the door was put in place, thus giving ourselves that much more time!"

Harry straightened up, frowning, thinking. Then slowly, a smile started across his face, growing in breadth until his lips nearly formed a link between his ears. "Say, you *have* something there!" he said. "That way, we have unlimited time in which to— Oh damn!"

"A hitch?" guessed Olga, slightly squinting one eye as one who anticipates a crushing blow.

Harry nodded. "You see, Olga —This is kind of hard to get over to someone who hasn't experienced it, but—When I went back in time, the *other* me, the one who normally occupied the time I'd returned to, had the edge on existence."

"Had the what?" she said, bewildered.

"I mean that I appeared as a sort of intangible wraith of myself, watching the 'real' Harry Lindstrom make preparations to test the machine. He couldn't see me at all, nor could I make him hear or feel me. It was frightening, up till the time when he got into the machine to go back. The instant he vanished in the 'real' machine, I and my wraith-machine became solid and substantial, taking the place of the other me and his machine. See?" Olga nodded sadly.

"You can't occupy the same place in time that—uh—the other 'you' already occupies. Which means, of course—"

"That if you and I *did* use the machine to evade the man from the university when he came to call, we would have to remain as wraiths, unable to do any additional research or anything else, until that point in time where our 'otherselves' went back to avoid the university man, at which point *we* would become real just in time to answer the door and let the man in, thus saving ourselves exactly nothing."

Olga tilted her head to one side thoughtfully as he spoke, considering something. As he finished, she said: "Why can't we try it anyhow, Harry? Then, as wraiths, we can leave the cottage here, and go out into the world, for all practical purposes invisible, and—oh—sneak into movies for nothing, and . . ."

Harry laughed. "Not bad, Olga, not bad. Except that it would get pretty boring after awhile. We couldn't steal any money, since we cannot contact

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any 'real' object, so that kills the idea of our possibly granting our own 'grant' for research. Nor could we eat or drink anything, and one does get hungry, and thirsty, in that state—"

"We could bring a lunch," said Olga. "It'd turn into a wraith-lunch, of course, but couldn't we, as wraiths, eat a wraith-lunch?"

Harry shrugged. "Quite possibly. The point is, it would get us no closer to our goal: Namely, the development of a practical time-travel machine."

"True," said Olga, with a wistful sigh. She started to reach for her drink, then stopped and looked at Harry, her eyes wide with inspiration. "How about a mummy-case?" she said.

"You sound like you're offering me something out of a necrophile's larder," Harry muttered. "What do you mean, how about a mummy-case?"

"To *travel* in, of course," she said impatiently. "We take a case that hasn't been opened for a few thousand years, and we're all set. We can travel back to any time within the period during which the case remained shut, can't we?"

Harry sat upright, his jaw dropping. "Why—I guess—Holy jumping catfish! Why *couldn't* we!"

"Of course—" Olga said, cautioningly, "There are no mummy-cases I can think of that haven't been opened at one time or another, Harry. Archeologists are worse than kids who find a ribbon-wrapped package under the Christmas tree. They go out of their minds till the thing is opened."

Harry scratched the side of his jaw and thought hard. "Still," he said, "a lot of these cases have only been opened for a few days' inspection, and then put into museums and left shut . . . If we *did* travel back in one of them, we would only regress in age those few days we traveled with the lid off the case . . . Hmmm."

"We'd need a fairly recent one, I suppose," said Olga. "The later the case was discovered, the less time it's had to exist with the seals off . . ."

"Uh-huh," nodded Harry, getting slowly to his feet. "I think I'll buzz old Cramer back at the university. He teaches archaeology, and he'd have the information we want."

"I'll bet he wants to come along," said Olga. "No professor of archaeology would pass up a chance to tour ancient Egypt."

Harry chuckled. "Don't worry, we can use him. After all, he can speak the ancient languages, and we can't . . . Don't you think so? You look annoyed."

"I was just thinking," Olga

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muttered, "of housing conditions."

"Whose?" said Harry, baffled, sitting on the arm of her chair.

"Ours," she retorted. "I don't mind being squeezed in with *you*, Harry. But *three* people in *one* mummy-case?"

"It's for science," said Harry. "Besides, Cramer is five-foot-two, and skinny as a croquet-wicket. We won't even notice him." He jumped up suddenly, and smacked his palms together. "Now, you'd better get on the phone and book passage for three to Egypt."

"Egypt?" said Olga. "Can't we leave from here?"

"Only," said Harry, patiently, "if we want to arrive back in *North America* three thousand years ago. My machine carries us through time, not space."

IN Khartoum, a week later, they borrowed a mummy-case from a local museum, rented a small quonset hut near the delta of the two branches of the Nile on which that city stands, and locked themselves in, first into the quonset, and then into the mummy-case. Cramer, as predicted, was with them.

What with Olga's box-lunch, the automobile battery, the fragile wiring of the time-machine in a small box, *and* the three of them, things were kind of cramped. They'd had to take the mummy out of the case and leave it on the quonset floor.

Harry flicked the switch . . . There was a hum, pricklings along their limbs, then silence, and a fractional flicker of light.

"Where are we?" mumbled Professor Cramer, his face buried uncomfortably in the hollow of Harry's elbow, as the light died.

"And *when* are we?" added Olga, who had insisted on riding with her arms clasped about Harry's neck.

"Well," said Harry, "that flicker of light was the few recent times during which the mummy-case was opened by archeologists . . . Though 'recent' is no longer the word, to us, because those instants of time are thousands of years ahead of us, now. We ought to be back to the time-period when this case was first constructed . . . Ah, yes! See here, where the light comes through the unsealed edge?"

"Then this case has just been constructed?" said Cramer, with considerable elation. "Oh rapture, to be able to view the ancient Egyptian at his actual work of hand-hewing mummy-cases and sarcophagi." Then, as though it had just occurred to him, he asked, "We are truly back in Egypt, aren't we?"

Harry shrugged, a neat trick in their close confines, and said,

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"So far as I know. That's why I had us pick modern-day Khartoum for our take off spot. If we're truly back three thousand years, here at the junction of the Blue Nile with the White Nile, we should run into all sorts of ancient people. But don't count on there being stonecutters around, Cramer."

"Why," said Cramer's suddenly petulant voice, "not?"

"Because we are now in a wraith-sarcophagus of the original one, see? Heaven only knows where *it's* at. But wherever it is, it is just now being made. That's how I stopped us, you know. I simply rigged a part of the electric wiring across a gap in one of the carvings in here. Apparently, we are back to the point where the cutter has not as yet chiseled out that gap. Hence, the sudden infusion of stone into the region has cut off our power, and here we are."

"Oh," crooned Olga, caressing Harry's face with moist warm lips, "you're so maddeningly intelligent! And you're all mine!"

"That is not scientific behavior," Cramer said coldly.

"Is a scientist not an observer of action and reaction of objects in controlled environment? And is our environment not controlled by the lid of this case? And isn't biology a science?" said Olga, with wild triumph in her voice.

Cramer cleared his throat, to cover his embarrassment. "But your specialty is physics," he pointed out delicately.

Further argument was impeded by a sudden interruption. The lid had been violently lifted away from the case and flung to the hot desert sands, and the tangled trio was all at once squinting through blazing Sahara sunlight at a fierce-visaged Egyptian male, armed with a bright copper scimitar.

He shouted something at them, and it didn't sound pleasant.

"What did he say, Cramer?" asked Harry, cautiously helping Olga out of the case, keeping a wary eye on that scimitar.

"I don't *know!*" said Cramer, with vast disappointment. "I thought I knew all the dialects of this era . . . Wait, let me try talking to him—" He mumbled something fast and glottal at the tall giant, whose mahogany eyes and bronzed flesh just glinted back unwaveringly at the tiny professor.

"Maybe he's an idiot, or something?" ventured Olga.

"His speech hardly seems halting enough for that," said Harry, shaking his head. "Let me try sign language."

He stepped between the bronzed giant and the professor, and held his right hand palm

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forward at the end of his arm, hoping this would be a gesture of peace. After a moment, the giant extended his own palm, and touched it to Harry's.

"Nice going," said Olga. "Now what?"

Harry dropped his hand and sighed, "I don't know; I'm all out of signs."

"Wait," said Olga, "I think he's trying to tell us something."

The giant was pointing with a quivering forefinger at the mummy-case, then at the ground, and mouthing bitter-sounding syllables. Olga was the first to detect the trouble.

"Look!" she said, with a sweeping fling of her arm toward the case. "We have landed on his plowshare, and his zebu cannot pull it."

Harry looked, and sure enough, there was a tired-looking humped ox with its traces snagged beneath the stone case they had just vacated. "It can't be," he said. "That is only a wraith-case, and has no weight."

"Sure," said Olga, "but a moment ago, we were *in* it, to a total of about four-hundred-fifty pounds. Tell our friend to try it again."

"I'll show him, it's easier," said Harry. With that, he went to the mummy-case, took it by the edges, and heaved. It moved not an inch, although his hands moved sharply upward.

"Damn," he said. "It's gone totally intangible."

The Egyptian, as if sensing Harry's intent, approached the case, and with a mighty heave, sent it tumbling back onto the sand, exposing his rude wooden plow to view.

"I don't get it," said Olga, clutching Harry's arm. "If it's a wraith, how come he could touch it?"

"And if it's not, how come you couldn't?" added Cramer.

While the Egyptian sat down on the sand, a rather daring move considering his abbreviated loincloth, Harry scratched his head and pondered. "Well, let's think it out in detail: When we arrived, the case was non-wraith enough to keep us from falling out through a wall; quite solid to us. Then, just now, when I tried to move it, it was all-wraith, and I couldn't touch it, but this ad for ManTan could, so it is therefore real to *him*. However, so are *we* real to him, which doesn't make sense. How can he be in contact with both us *and* the case, when we can't contact the case?"

"You mean," said Cramer, excitedly, "is this man real or a wraith! Apparently, he must be both!"

Harry's eyes lighted. "Ye gods, of *course!* Now it makes sense to me. Look—" He dropped

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to his knees on the hot sand and began sketching with his forefinger. "This," he drew a vertical line, "is 1040 B.C., three thousand years before 1960, our date of departure. And this," he drew another vertical line far to the right of the first, like unconnected goalposts, "is 1960. Okay. Now here—" Harry drew a sweeping horizontal line from one era to the other, leaving a short, squat "H" on the sand, "is the existence-line of the case. It existed in 1040 B.C. and continued to exist through 1960 A.D."

The Egyptian, watching with wide-eyed interest, mumbled something and arose. The trio looked up at his towering form.

"What's with him?" asked Harry, apprehensively.

"Damned if I know," said Cramer. "He looks awfully upset about something . . . *Hey*—! Wait, come back here!"

Despite the professor's cries, the giant was lumbering away at a fast trot over the sands, leaving scimitar, plow and zebu standing idle on the sands.

"He looked scared," Olga commented. "I wonder why?"

Harry eyed the diagram on the sand before him. "Maybe his mother was frightened by a halfback?"

Cramer and Olga sighed in unison, and slumped down beside Harry, watching the diagram. "Well, never mind him for now. Go on with your theory," said Olga.

Harry drew a second horizontal line parallel to the case-line, but barely a hand long, touching the 1040 line. Then he drew another short line that started just before the 1960 line, and stopped when it reached it. "These," he said, indicating them respectively as he spoke, "are *his* lifespan and *our* lifespan. Notice that *he* starts shortly *before* the mummy-case, dies—I assume—sometime in B.C. while the case goes on existing through time, and than *we* come into coexistence with the case at this *later* date."

"But so what?" Olga asked.

"So *our* lifespans, instead of continuing normally onward past 1960, suddenly *reverse*—" Harry put his finger at the end of the short horizontal touching 1960, and swept back a long curve to the 1040 line, "—and this case *with* us—" He did the same with the long case-line.

"Now, there *is* no other-us at this point of time, so we do not exist as wraiths, but as solid people. Since at *this* time, *he* really exists, he is solid to us, too. But the case has its counterpart existing somewhere else in Egypt at the moment, so it cannot exist as a real object for us, although it *can* exist as a real object for *him*, since his reality is actually non-extant, and—"

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"*Finally,*" groaned Olga, "I get an inkling. All you're trying to tell us is that—although he is apparently real—he's actually a ghost from the past, but '*realer*' to us than this case can be."

"How can that *be*?" choked Cramer, peering hostilely at the two of them over the tops of his rimless bifocals.

"Easy," said Harry. "The past is actual, that is, it really happened, so it has genuine reality. However, for a mummy-case to exist in two places at one time is impossible, so it becomes a wraith. *But*—!" Harry stabbed Cramer's narrow chest with a declarative forefinger, "Since our bronzed friend is somewhere between a wraith and a real person, he can contact both wraith and persons. Just like a frog can live in air or water with equal ease, but a creature of one cannot live in the other."

"But the case—!" exclaimed Olga. "Why was it solid to us as we arrived, and a wraith now?"

"Oh, that!" laughed Harry. "Remember how I broke the circuit, by shooting us back in time before that tiny chunk was carved into the design on the case? Well, we arrived a split second before it was carved, then the stonecutter, off somewhere in Egypt here, made that cutting stroke that matched the case exactly with its forebear, and it had to turn into a wraith. Remember, as soon as we stopped heading back in time, we started heading forward again, only now at normal speed of second, minute, and hour."

"Oh," said Cramer, deciding to drop the subject. "Well, let's get to exploring the country, shall we? How much lunch did you bring, Olga?"

"Three fried chickenlegs, six ham sandwiches, and a gallon thermos full of fresh lemonade," she said. "That should stave off hunger-pangs for at least a half-day's exploration. Maybe we can find some dates, or coconuts, or whatever grows in this region, and—"

"*Ah-ah*!" cautioned Harry, with a fierce headshake. "No! Remember, these things are three thousand years old. We can take no chances of returning to our time and having them turn to ancient dust in our digestive tracts, or possibly petrify from their great age and turn our insides to stone . . . Or, and this is worst of all, turn into their *descendants* as we move forward through history once more. I'd hate to get to 1960 with my stomach filled with a coconut grove!"

They arose, dusted the clinging sand from their clothes, and started to walk toward the distant glitter of water. Harry carried the time-reverser, not want-

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ing to leave it unprotected in the open mummy-case on the sands behind them.

"I'm worried," said Olga, as they trudged across the hot dry wastes toward the water. "If we can't touch that case, how do we get the lid back on for the return-trip?"

"We don't need that particular case anymore," said Harry. "Because we'll be going *forward* in time, and we have only to take suitable precautions that the vehicle we choose can *last* for the next three thousand years."

"What do we do," she muttered, "hide in a closet somewhere in *Pompeii*?" She added grimly, "And hope it's fireproof?"

"It's a thought," said Harry, and Olga gave up.

THEY soon reached the bank of the junction of the two Niles. The bank was green with dozing crocodiles, and Olga would go no nearer than one hundred yards. They turned, therefore, and paralleled the river, walking until they saw the gleaming towers of an enormous city, dead ahead.

"Say," said Cramer, "that doesn't look like any city I've ever read about, Harry . . . I wonder if we've come upon some lost civilization."

"All I want to do," said Harry, "is find out the date. Soon's we know for sure how far back we've gone, we can head for home. My job was to build a workable time-machine."

"But—" Cramer protested. "An undiscovered civilization —!" He sputtered, trying to explain. "Who knows what things we may not learn from the inhabitants of this city!"

"*I* know," said Olga. "We may not learn from them how to survive long enough to get mentioned in the history books. That kind of information I can do without."

"Say," said Harry, interrupting their colloquy, "here comes our plowman again— And he's got a small mob with him."

Even as he was speaking, Harry was plopping down behind a small hump of sand, and Olga and Cramer followed suit a second later. They watched with interest as the trotting Egyptian farmer led a group of richly-garbed men in a quick spurt toward the site where he'd first seen the trio from the future.

The men running after him seemed to all be rather ancient, at least, all had long grey beards and wrinkled faces. They wore long flowing robes of something lightweight that only looked heavy because of its dull purple color and silver trim.

"They can't be the police . . ." suggested Olga. "They don't look as though they had the

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strength to give a parking ticket."

"They're keeping pace with that farmer all right," Harry remarked. "I wonder what they're so excited about?"

"Whatever impression we made on that man," said Cramer, "it must have been a powerful one, for him to talk those old men into that frantic gallop . . . I wonder—"

"You wonder what?" said Harry, but Cramer was intently drawing in the sand with his finger, frowning.

Harry watched, then said, "That's the same thing I drew, back by the mummy-case. Do you think *that's* what excited him?"

"Well, he ran off just as you finished the stroke that indicated the existence-line of the mummy-case, leaving this elongated 'H' . . . Ah, wait a minute! I have it. Look, he was squatting to one side, Harry, so, to him, the drawing looked like a Romanesque numeral one, same as the 'I' of our era."

"So?" said Olga shaking her head. "I don't get it."

"Harry drew a hierogram," said Cramer. "That is, a character of sacred significance to ancient Egyptians. I think that poor man has us pegged as the temple-profaning type."

"Maybe," Olga said, "they think we're gods, or something."

"Hardly," said Cramer dryly, "after the way we all cringed away from that scimitar of his."

"But the symbol I drew—" said Harry. "What did it stand for?"

"The nurse-goddess, Renutet," said Cramer. "Sort of a woman's body with a serpent's head. Seems to me it's a cobra-head, if I recall correctly. There's a sandstone statue of her in the museum in Cairo. Of course, the reason for the I-symbol is that it represents a serpent that walks upright."

"So why's that farmer so excited?" demanded Harry. "A profaned nurse-symbol shouldn't upset him."

Cramer smiled ruefully. "She's also the goddess of the *harvest,* Harry. We've probably, as far as he's concerned, blighted his entire crop."

Olga gave a short, humorless laugh. "I don't think he'd grow much of a crop in that sandy soil back there, anyhow."

Cramer shrugged. "Probably not; but now he has a place to affix the blame: Smack on us."

"Well—" Harry heaving himself up from the sand, "before the farmer and his elderly pals start tracing our path across the sand, we'd better get into the city and find out the date."

"I wish you wouldn't keep harping on the date," said

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Cramer, following Harry and Olga across the hot sands toward the distant walls of the city. "There are more important things."

"Not to us," said Harry. "And, by the way, if you are thinking in terms of souvenirs, remember that you can't take anything that can't be squeezed with us into our mummy-case on the return trip. Scarabs, okay; statues, nix."

"I thought we weren't going to use the mummy-case," said Cramer, curiously.

"I just figured out how we can," said Harry. "We go back to the wraith-case, then send ourselves back in time to the moment the other-us got out of it. We'll regress in age, but only to the age we were when we got here, so we won't need a shield—Oh damn . . ."

"What is it, Harry?" asked Olga, noting the perplexed converging of his brows.

"The wire—!" he grunted, pointing to a two-inch gap in part of a curling strand of metal. "When that bit of stone stopped our time-flight, it did it by severing the power-lead. So we are short a couple of inches of contact for our current, two inches left back inside the unhewn-rock section of our mummy-case."

"You mean—" Olga stared at him, appalled, "we can't go back to 1960?"

"Not unless we can get a hunk of wire someplace," Harry sighed. "Look—" He flicked the power-switch from "past" to "future". Nothing happened. Not even a tube glowed, nor was there the expected hum of the tiny dynamo. "See? It's dead."

"Then so are we," said Cramer solemnly. "Because, sooner or later, we'll have to eat and drink. And the moment we do, we dare not travel into the future . . . Dare we?"

Harry scratched the back of his neck. "It *would* be kind of risky . . ."

"*I* have it!" said Olga, brightly. "When we get back to the case, we just contact the ends of the wire there, where it sticks out of the stone!"

Harry shook his head. "No dice, honey. *That* cut-off gimmick was for travelling *back* in time. We need a different gimmick for travelling forward. I had planned on fastening the power-switch to the lid, so the instant we hit the period when it was removed, the power would shut off."

"Wouldn't that put us in the tomb when it was first discovered?" said Cramer. "Or at least in the same year?"

"Sure," said Harry. "But that'd be in the late 1800's, and we could take the few necessary jumps forward in time till we hit our own period."

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"That farmer's scimitar was copper," said Olga. "Could we use *it*, maybe?"

Harry brightened. "Possibly. Of course, we'd have to *get* it from him, first. Either of you know any judo?"

They shook their heads.

"Well, it was a thought," said Harry, striding steadily forward toward the city walls. Then Olga yelped.

"They've seen us!" she cried. Then, as Harry shaded his eyes with his hand to scan the wall ahead for archers or some such danger, she grabbed his hand and shouted, "No, not there. *Behind* us!"

Harry turned about. Sure enough, the Egyptian farmer and his purple-clad cohorts were running up from the rear, shouting alien words whose fury needed no translation. To fight off even the entire pack of the ancients would have been a one-man job for Harry; but that farmer and his scimitar were another story entirely. Harry had an idea, and voiced it tersely to his companions.

"Run!" he said.

Over the burning yellow sands, with flying feet, the trio dashed, with the farmer and his friends hot on their heels.

Then Olga yelped again, as a tide of blue-clad men came rushing toward them from the gates of the city. They seemed to be soldiers, their short blue tunics hidden from belt to neck by silver cuirasses, their feet shod in silvery sandals, and their upraised right hands waving dangerous-looking assagais.

"Trapped!" squealed Olga, leaping into Harry's arms. A second later, Cramer embraced them both, and hid his head between them.

"Tell me when it's over!" he wept, trembling.

Well, thought Harry, those short spears'll be neater than that copper scimitar. He encircled his companions with his arms, and shut his eyes as the blue-clad horde descended upon them. There was the terrifying clank of metal, the angry shouts of the soldiers, and the thunder of their feet . . . Then all the sounds grew softer and softer, and Harry opened his eyes to see that the soldiers had run right past them.

"It's not *us* they're after!" he exclaimed, pointing after the charging phalanx. "It's *them*!"

It was quite true. Olga and Cramer looked to see the farmer and his purple-clad friends dashing away along the sands, with the howling footsoldiers not far behind them.

"Maybe—" said Cramer, nervously, "we've become wraiths?"

"Impossible," said Harry. "To do that, we'd have to have *real-*

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versions of ourselves somewhere in this period. Besides, those guys ran around us, quite deliberately."

"Did you see that design on their breastplates?" asked Olga. "It was almost the duplicate of that thing you drew in the sand . . . Like a capital 'I'."

"Ah!" said Cramer. "Then they are temple-guards, not soldiers." His hand smacked loudly against his forehead. "Of course —Those others, in their purple-and-silver robes, are the priests of Bast, the cat-headed goddess!"

"Bast and Renutet are at odds?" suggested Olga.

"Always," said Cramer, nodding. "After all, snakes and cats both like to feed on rodents, and there are only so many rodents to go around."

"Hmmm," said Harry. "Let me figure this out: We arrive, I accidentally make a Renutet-symbol in the sand, the farmer runs to tell the priests of Bast, then Renutet's temple-guards come and chase the priests away. That means that the guards must be on our side, right? And they saw the farmer giving the warning to Bast's priests, and took off after them. Now, why would a farmer be against us, if we're representatives, apparently, of the harvest-goddess?"

"I thought he assumed we had profaned Renutet," said Cramer.

Harry frowned. "No. In that case, he would've gone to Renutet's guards for help, not to those other guys. Which means, I think, that he is against us because we seem to be pro-Renutet."

"All of which proves what?" said Olga.

"That this guy isn't really a farmer," said Harry, with a bemused smile. "Because naturally a farmer would be on the side of the goddess of harvest."

"Sounds logical," nodded Cramer. "Then why was he there?"

"Excuse me if I sound goofy," said Harry, "but I have the feeling that he was a spy for Bast; disguised as a farmer, he would not alert the suspicions of Renutet's representatives, us."

"But that sounds as though we were *expected* to show up where we did . . ." said Olga, apprehensively. "But that's impossible!"

"Why impossible?" said Harry. "We *did* show up, didn't we? Maybe one of their old high priests conjured up our image on his crystal ball."

"That's unscientific," said Olga.

"Why?" said Harry. "If we can *travel* through time, then can't a priest of Bast *look* through it?"

"Only," said Olga, "if he does it through electronics!"

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"Don't be an idiot," snapped Harry. "The old crystal-sets could pick up radio broadcasts without using electronics. Why can't a properly-stressed crystal ball pick up pictures out of time?"

"Well—" said Olga, half-convinced. "I *suppose* that—"

"Here come Renutet's guards again," interrupted Cramer. "How shall we act when they get to us?"

"Oh—" said Harry, thinking hard, "kind of solemn, I guess. As befits emissaries from a goddess, I mean."

The trio stood tall and stiff, with folded arms, as the guards came rushing back to them. Harry extended his palm in the sign of peace once more. "Hail!" he said, smiling.

And then, as Olga shrieked in protest, the guards very unceremoniously shoved them all to the sand, bound them hand and foot, and carted them off towards the gates of the city . . .

I GIVE up," muttered Cramer, lying on the soul-smelling straw against the dungeon wall. "I don't know *who's* on our side!"

"Me neither," grunted Harry, striving vainly to loosen the stout cords upon his wrists. "It doesn't make sense."

Olga, huddled beside him, sniffled loudly. "I wish we *were* wraiths, now!" She shook her head sadly, letting her hair fall into her eyes. "But we don't even have our time-machine anymore . . ."

"I wonder if it's still out there on the sand, where they knocked us down?" said Harry. "If it is, we're in trouble. A simoom might spring up and cover it."

"Harry—!" said Olga, her voice trembling on the edge of impatient rage, "We are at *present* in *plenty* of trouble already! Even if the machine were here in this cell with us, we couldn't use it without those missing inches of wire."

"That's true," sighed Harry. "But that's not what I'm worried about. See, if you recall the principle of the machine, it reverses time by un-movement, that is, it absorbs energy instead of expending it. That little metal box has stored up three thousand years of travel-power inside it. It's as though the three of us had tied elastic bands to the future, then strained against them when we came to the past. All that has to happen is a violent upset of equilibrium, and all that energy gets released."

"Harry—!" said Olga. "You don't think that we'd—uh—'snap back' to the future?"

"We just might," he said. "Except that we'd all age three thousand years in the process." Then he glanced around at the grimy

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black walls of the chamber, anxiously. "But the machine wouldn't do that, not without the power-leads in place. It would expend all its chronenergy in a blast of power such as the world has never seen."

"But if it's out on the sand—" Olga realized aloud, with a quaver of fright, "*anything* might happen to it! A crocodile might bite it, or a camel step on it, or—"

"Right," said Harry. "And then, *whammy!*"

"Oh dear," said Cramer. "You have just given me a terrible hint of why, perhaps, there is no record of a city at this point in any of the history books. If that thing went off—"

"—there'd be no city for them to record," said Harry. "And since there *is* no such record . . . Well, it kind of looks as though that thing is *going* to go off."

They sat and stared at the floor of the cell awhile, each lost in his own dreary introspections. Then the door was opened, and one of the blue-clad guards stepped in.

He grunted something, making imperative gestures that they get up and go with him. There seemed to be nothing better to do, so they complied with his wishes.

Their way led along a long, grim stone corridor, lighted by

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reed torches set into wall sconces every fifty feet or so, then up a worn flight of sandstone steps and into a small barred cell. Outside the bars, another guard produced a large key, and let them and the other guard out.

"I'll bet they have a perfect attendance record among their prisoners," observed Olga. "Once you're in *those* cells, you're in till they're good and ready to let you out."

They followed their guard down another reed-lit corridor, this one of dark green marble, and not quite so grim, and then he halted at an archway and gestured for them to precede him. They stepped through, and found themselves in a vast chamber, all of that dark green marble. The floor was inlaid with odd little designs, made of burnished gold, and ahead of them, twin golden braziers on tall tripods burnt some incense with a dizzying, musky scent that rose in pale violet clouds toward the gloomy apex of the arched ceiling. Between the tripods, tall thick pillars flanked a circular dais, on which stood a figure with a woman's body and a cobra's head.

"Hey—!" said Cramer. "I wonder if that's the statue they have in the Cairo museum? It —" He stopped, abruptly, and emitted a sound not unlike that made by a rooster who has just been trodden upon by a horse. A large horse.

For the figure on the dais had moved.

Two long slender arms extended toward them, and gestured for them to approach. Harry was the first to comply, albeit hesitantly, and the other two tagged along with even less enthusiasm.

"It's—It's probably a mask, a headress of some kind," said Cramer. "It just *looks* like a cobra's head . . . It can't *be* one—"

"It is," said the figure on the dais, its glittering obsidian eyes cold and empty of emotion. "I am Renutet."

"You're speaking English," said Harry. "That's impossible."

The lipless mouth of Renutet opened wide, and an angry hiss made them all jump back from the dais. "That is a fool's statement, Harry Lindstrom," said the goddess, "since I *am* obviously able to speak English." The dim smoky light from the braziers was a dull sheen on her protruding white fangs as she spoke. "At the time I looked into the future to predict your coming, I analyzed the tongue you spoke, and learned it. It is not a difficult tongue, except insofar as my labial limitations prevent me from precise pronunciation."

"You *are* stressing your sibilants a bit," Harry said. "But

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look, why are we here? Are you for us or against us?"

"I do not know that," said Renutet. "The symbols were not clear. They only told me that you would help me in some way."

"Do you *need* help?" marvelled Cramer.

"I did not think so," said Renutet, "but I must, or you would not be able to give it, as the signs foretold."

"What kind of help *did* we give? Or *will* we give?" said Cramer, hopelessly fuddled in his tenses.

"The view remained incomplete on that point," said Renutet. "Perhaps if you told me various things that you can do, I could espy the proper ability . . ."

Harry looked at the others, scratched his head, then said hesitantly, "I am a scientist— Perhaps it's in the field of physics?"

Cramer, after a hungry look at the marble architecture all about him, said, "Or archeology?"

Olga, after a narrow look at Renutet's scaly features, said, "Or plastic surgery?"

Before Renutet had the chance to comment on Olga's remark, Harry swiftly interrupted with, "But look—! It should be simple to discover: Whatever it is, the priests of Bast wanted to prevent our doing it, right?"

There was almost a sparkle in the goddess's dull ebony eyes. "Of course!" she exclaimed. "After all, my rival goddess can look into the future, too . . . Now, what could it be?"

"Well," said Cramer, "Bast— Or Bubastis— Which name do you generally call her by—?"

"I usually refer to her as 'that feline'," muttered Renutet. "But what were you going to say?"

"Well, since she represents all the cats in Egypt, and you represent the harvest, all we have to do is find the field wherein the interests of a cat conflict with the interests of a farmer, and we should be on the right track."

Harry frowned. "Let me see— What do cats hate that you need for a harvest?"

Olga snapped her fingers. "*I* know," she said. "Water!"

Renutet stroked her scaly jaw meditatively. "We *could* use water— This desert region isn't the easiest spot in the world to raise crops. But the Nile isn't due to rise for a month, yet . . ."

"There's your answer," said Harry. "The time-lag. You can only *look* into the future, Renutet; we can *travel* there. And *back*, which is the important part."

"*If*—" said Olga, desperately, "we have our time-machine!"

"Ah," said Renutet. "That strange little box of metals with which you were intercepted by

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my guards!" She clapped her hands sharply, and their cell-guard, who had not ventured beyond the archway, now came hurrying across the dark green marble floor to prostrate himself before the dais.

"Bring to me that machine which these three were bearing when you captured them," intoned Renutet, imperiously. "And at once!"

The guard lifted his face cautiously from the floor, and stared nervously at the snake-goddess. "You mean that funny-looking little metal box with all the wires and stuff?"

"Yesss!" hissed Renutet, angry at his dilatory manner. "And hurry!"

"But— But we haven't *got* it . . ." he mumbled, trembling. "You said to bring the people; we didn't think you wanted that box, too . . ."

"Fool!" screamed the goddess. "Swiftly—! Take ten of my best men and hurry to get it, lest it fall into the hands of the priests of Bubastis! Fly!"

Squeaking out anxious apologies, the guard scurried backward out of the vast chamber, and disappeared down the corridor with frantic slappings of his silvery sandals. Olga turned to Renutet with a puzzled frown.

"*He* speaks English, too?" she said.

"My dear girl, of course," said Renutet. "When I knew I would send him out to capture you three on your arrival, I had to teach him your tongue, did I not, in case he had to communicate with you?"

"Just how many people back here *do* speak English?" said Harry.

"Oh, about a dozen of my men, and myself," said Renutet. "Then, of course, Bubastis has undoubtedly learned your tongue, and taught it to some of her myrmidons . . . Why?"

"Professor Cramer, here, was having difficulty being understood or even understanding your tongue, Renutet, when we first arrived. I think now I understand why."

"Because the city might go whammy?" said Olga.

"No, because the infusion of this new tongue, English, into the language as it now exists, will produce a hybrid tongue in the future, and *that's* the tongue Cramer will learn to speak, not this ancient one, see?"

"Then—" Olga said hopefully, "we may *not* blow up?"

"That's what I'm hoping," said Harry. "Things are beginning to look up." His eyes began to dance. "And I think I know how we can return to our time without aging three thousand years, too!"

"How?" exclaimed Olga.

"Don't get your hopes up just

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yet," said Harry. "First we have to get our time-machine back."

From the corridor outside the chamber came the clang of heavy gates opening and closing, then the swift sounds of hurrying feet. "That didn't take long," Olga remarked.

Harry, Cramer and Olga turned toward the archway, waiting for the return of their machine. Then they gave simultaneous gasps of dismay, and backed toward the dais.

The men in the doorway were garbed in the purple-and-silver of Bubastis, the cat-goddess. The bronzed "farmer" with the copper scimitar was with them.

"How dare you profane my temple with your presence!" cried Renutet, stepping down from the dais and approaching the men in the archway, her spine stiff with menace as she raised her long arms over her head, fingers splayed toward them. "I shall call down a hundred agonizing dooms upon your silly heads—" she began, quivering with rage.

Then one of the grey-bearded men in the front rank of the group, smiling tigerishly, as befitted the goddess he served, whipped something from under his cloak and threw it down upon the dark green marble floor. A mouse.

"*Ssssss!*" cried Renutet, her cobra-hood distending. In an instant, she'd dropped to her knees, arms rigid at her sides, fingers turned out stiffly with palms downward. She began to sway back and forth, never taking her glittering dark eyes from the mouse, which twitched its whiskers and froze, terrified.

"Harry—" Olga whimpered, grabbing his arm. "Look!"

Her words were superfluous. Harry could not take his eyes from the sight. Renutet, swaying and undulating there in her knees, suddenly shrank laterally, until her body was barely four inches in diameter, and her feet merged to form a short scaly tail, and then she was a large cobra, advancing upon the terrified form of the mouse.

"*Echhh!*" muttered Cramer, shutting his eyes as the snake-goddess struck at her prey. When the squealing, hissing and tail-threshing were done, the mouse was gone, and a sleepy-eyed cobra closed its transparent nictitating membrane over contented black eyes.

"She's asleep!" marvelled Harry.

"She always sleeps after a heavy meal," remarked one of the purple-and-silver-clad priests of Bubastis. "Now, come with us, quickly, before her men return from their fruitless search."

"Fruitless?" said Harry, forlornly.

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"We found your machine upon the sands on our return to the city," said the priest. "Bubastis had seen far enough into the future to know its power; we brought it to her temple. Come."

Harry looked at them, then at the copper scimitar of the spy-farmer, and sighed. "Come on Olga . . . Professor . . ."

Olga walked wearily at his side, shaking her head as they followed the group out of the temple, the scimitar-man bringing up the rear. "Out of the snake-pit into the lion's den . . ." she muttered, hopelessly.

Outside the temple, they were led down the wide stone stairs to the earthen street, the citizens of the town drawing back in awe from the ranks of the high priests of Bubastis, murmuring in fright as they saw them emerging from the rival temple of Renutet. The procession crossed the narrow street, then went up a flight of stone stairs directly opposite, into a vast temple of dark crimson marble, over the doorway of which, on a short jutting pedestal, sat the sleek, inscrutable image of a cat, a cruel smile on its cold stone face.

"Like Gimbel's and Macy's," Harry remarked. "Competing for the favor of the townsfolk."

INSIDE, in another huge chamber, they were brought face to face with the cat-headed goddess, Bubastis, on her dais of crimson marble. She waved the priests and the swordsmen out.

"You are the three from the future," she said, without any preliminaries, as soon as her men had left the room. "You have come into the past to aid my arch-rival, Renutet."

"That's not true," said Harry. "We just came for a look. We had no intentions of helping anyone."

"If you will help *me*," said Bubastis, her whiskers a white flicker about her sharp-fanged muzzle, "I will spare your lives. I believe Renutet desired to employ you to make the Nile rise a month early, to help the crops?"

"Something like that," Harry admitted. "I don't even know if we could do it, but we were going to try."

"I would prefer a drought," smiled Bubastis. "When the river sinks down into steaming yellow mud, the surface of the waterless bed is littered with stranded fish . . ." Her pink tongue lickered across her muzzle, briefly. "The cats of Egypt would be most pleased."

"That'd be kind of hard to arrange," said Harry. "After all, even though I might be able to bring river-water from the future, I can't bring back dryness . . ."

"You can increase the sunlight, can you not?" smiled the

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cat-goddess. "You can drain sunlight from the *aten* of Ra after it has passed the westward horizon, correct?"

"What does she mean?" asked Olga.

"She means that when the sun goes down, I could use my machine to rob the rest of the planet of the sunlight it should get during the night-period here in Egypt; in other words, I could keep the sun shining here day *and* night. That should dry up the river in a hurry, in this equatorial climate."

"I'm getting thirsty," remarked Cramer. "What'll I *do?*"

"Ah, yes—" said Bubastis. "Here; this was found upon the sands beside your machine." She reached behind her on the dais and produced Olga's box-lunch, with its thermos of cold lemonade.

"Oh, thank you—!" said Cramer, reaching for it.

"Not yet!" smiled Bubastis, holding it back from him. "*If* your friend, Harry Lindstrom, does my bidding, *then* shall I give you your food, and precious drink. Not before."

"But I'm not sure my machine can *do* it . . ." Harry protested. "It's not time that's involved here, it's geography."

The eyes of Bubastis glittered angry green, and she clapped her hands sharply. The swordsman and the priests came at once.

"Take that little man—" she said, pointing at Cramer, "and prepare him for burial!"

"Hey—!" said Cramer. "No!"

"Just a minute, now—" Harry protested. "You can't do that to *him* just because *I* can't comply with your wishes!"

"You can comply!" insisted Bubastis. "And you will! Else your companion will be buried alive."

"Harry," squealed Cramer, fighting in vain as the burly Egyptian swordsman stripped him to his polka-dot shorts, "for heaven's sake, *comply!*"

Harry thought hard, desperately. "It will involve a certain amount of time-travel," he said cautiously. "You might have him buried before we got back . . ."

That is a chance you must take," smiled the cat-goddess, with cruel humor. "Now, what will you need?"

"Well," said Harry, "we will need the mummy-case in which we arrived. It is our only really safe conveyance . . ."

"I had thought as much," said Bubastis, gesturing toward one wall of the room. "I had it brought here already."

Harry looked, and there stood the case, awaiting them.

"Well, here's the idea," he said. "Olga and I will have to use the machine to return to the past, to the point where the case becomes tangible to us—"

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"What?" said Bubastis, puzzled.

"I'll show you," said Harry. Trotting over to the side of the room, he approached the case, which stood upright near the wall, and, stepping forward, passed through it from front to back as though it did not exist. "See?" he said. "This is but the ghost, sort of, of the actual case, which exists in this time. Olga and I will have to travel back to the point where this case becomes real to us, and then—"

"No," said Bubastis. "I know the markings of that case. It is sacred unto Isis, the moon-goddess. I will send runners to her temple at once, to get the original for you. I cannot have you wandering off into the past." She waved an arm, and two men left.

"Why not?" asked Harry.

"Because once in the past, you could intercept yourself at the moment of your arrival, and send yourself to safety in the future," said Bubastis, with a wicked grin.

"You don't understand," Harry protested. "We couldn't contact *ourselves;* we'd be wraiths to one another."

"I do not choose to believe that," said the cat-goddess, with finality. "You will use the actual mummy-case when my men bring it back!" Then she smiled, slit-eyed, at her swordsman, who held Cramer in an iron grip. "Meantime, you may proceed with the burial preparations."

"No!" whimpered Cramer. "Oh no, *please!*"

But three of the priests had already wheeled forward a large copper vat, filled with a gluey yellow composition of resin and heady spices, and were immersing a long roll of coarse white bandage into it. Then one of them lifted out a dripping end of the roll, and handed it to the swordsman. He took the sticky tape, and began to wind it about Cramer's feet.

"Stop!" shrieked the professor, kicking frantically.

But the gigantic Egyptian was too strong for him. Little by little, he was swathed in the resin-impregnated tape, until his body was completely immobilized, all but his nose and his panic-stricken eyes behind his rimless bifocals. From his tape-tied mouth came grunts of sheer terror.

"Harry—!" whispered Olga, as he held her tightly against him, his eyes riveted on Cramer, "What can we *do?* You can't influence the *sunlight* with your machine!"

"Tell that to Bubastis!" Harry groaned.

Then into the chamber rushed the two men who had left by her command, bearing between them the heavy stone mummy-case,

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the original of the wraith beside the wall. They set it flat upon the crimson marble floor, tilted the lid open for the cat-goddess's inspection, bowed servilely, then fell forward on their faces, dead. Out of their backs jutted a number of slender arrow-shafts, the feathers pale blue, and arced in the shape of tiny lunes.

"Apparently," said Bubastis, "they ran into difficulties with the temple-guards over at Isis's place . . . Oh!"

Her exclamation came as she heard, then saw, the horde of angry bowmen who came thundering down the corridor and into the crimson chamber. Upon their gleaming breastplates they bore the silver crescent of the moon-goddess. They looked mad.

"You have no business here!" she said, striding toward them.

One of Isis's men nocked an arrow and sent it whistling across the room toward the breast of the goddess. Halfway there, it sparkled into golden flame and vanished, while the man who had loosed the shaft turned into dark crimson glass and shattered into a few million shards and spicules.

One of his companions, a little brighter, opened a tiny silver cage and let something fall onto the floor. Another mouse.

Instantly, Bubastis dropped to all fours, roared out a challenge, and shriveled into the form of a small black cat, which chased the mouse into a corner and began to toy with it, as cats will, totally preoccupied and dead to the situation elsewhere in the chamber.

"A rodent-raiser could be well-nigh invincible back here!" Harry remarked, shaking his head.

Olga nodded in agreement. "Have mouse, will travel." Then she looked at the guards of Isis, who were convering upon the elderly priests of Bubastis. "What does one throw on the floor when one is dragged before a moon-goddess?" she asked.

"Green cheese?" said Harry, miserably. Then, "Hey—" Look at Cramer!"

Olga looked, and emitted a shrill scream of horror.

For the giant Egyptian, with no countermanding order, had wrapped the professor's face completely, now, in the gummy resin-stained tape.

"He'll smother!" she cried. "Harry, *do* something!"

Harry looked around for a weapon, something anything to get at the giant with, and then he saw upon the dais the tiny metal box housing his time-machine.

"Come on!" he shouted to Olga, grabbing her hand and running toward the dais. "If we can only get out of this period with Cramer, maybe we can unwrap him—!"

But one of the priests, alert to

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their intentions, got there a scant instant before them, and snatched up the machine.

"No," he said, leading them in a desperate game of tag around the pillars bordering the dais, "you shall not escape!"

"Olga, you go this way, and I'll go that way—!" said Harry, as they attempted to head the old man off. Then; just as they converged upon him, a blue-feathered shaft from one of Isis's bowmen pinned him like a butterfly against the pillar, and the machine, falling from his jerking hands, skidded across the marble floor toward the resin-tank.

"Hurry!" cried Olga, leading Harry in his frantic run after it, as hissing arrows flew on all sides of her.

"Look out!" yelled Harry, pulling her down to the floor behind the copper tank, as a shower of the blue-feathered shafts swished past the point where she'd been standing.

"Get it—!" she said, scrambling on hands and knees toward the tiny metal box, kicking the lunchbox out of her way.

Then one of the Isis-guards came rushing around the tank, and jumped between them and the machine. Grinning, he slipped an arrow into his bow . . . and slipped on a fried chicken-leg.

And then a needle-pointed arrow, with dull green feathers, slammed into his chest and he toppled heavily to the floor. Harry heard the angry hissing at the archway, and even before he and Olga rose to their feet, he knew that Renutet was through with her nap, and had come for her Nile-raising trio.

And she had. In the doorway, blue-tunics fought with their silver spears against the arrows of the lune-bearers, while purple-clad priests of Bubastis dodged about in the melee, screaming imprecations, but mostly avoiding getting killed.

Then in the corner, rising from the corpse of the dead mouse (heart-failure), Bubastis, once more the cat-headed woman, strode imperiously across the crimson floor to confront Renutet, furious feline against choleric cobra, over a pile of sandwiches.

Both raised their hands high over their heads and began singsonging frantic syllables of necromantic spells, until the air in the chamber reeked of sulphur and grew horribly hot, as their sorceries met in immovable deadlock.

Harry grabbed Olga's arm and dragged her toward the writhing figure of Cramer on the floor of the chamber. Partway there, at the edge of the "real" mummy-case, he staggered to a halt, and yelled— "The machine, Olga!"

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She looked toward where his gaze was riveted, and gave another one of her yelps. For one of the struggling guards had accidentally struck it as he fell, and it was skidding into the side of the copper resin-tank, the two bare ends of wire about to make contact with that conducting surface . . . And the dial was set on "future".

"Hang on!" yelled Harry. "We're going to snap back!"

With a cry, he threw her into the open mummy-case, dived in after her, and slammed the lid. Then, as they lay in an instant of darkness, they heard, for one terrible millisecond, the sound of an explosion such as the world had never seen . . . Then they were falling.

THERE was a crash, and the lid flew off the case.

Harry sat up, and stared about, dazed. They were in the market-place of modern-day Khartoum, surrounded by goggle-eyed natives, all mumbling prayers and staring at them with startlement and curiosity.

"Well," said Harry, helping Olga out of the case, "it happened, just as I feared it would. The three thousand years of stored-up time-energy were released, and we got shoved back to our own era, from our elastic-band dis-equilibrium existence in the past."

"But Cramer?" said Olga. "He wasn't in the case! What can have happened to *him?*"

"Wherever he is," Harry sighed, "he's three thousand years old, now. Traveling that many years into the future without protection, he'd be— Hey! Hey!"

"What is it?" gasped Olga, as he grabbed her hand and started dashing through the crowd. Nobody tried to stop them. Most of the people ran the other way.

Minutes later, they were dashing into the quonset hut from which they'd taken off, on their initial journey. There on the floor, where they'd left it, lay the mummy which they had removed from its case before they'd left.

With frantic fingers, Harry tore the withered, dusty strips of cloth from off the face. The features he uncovered were slightly blue, but when he'd torn a bit more of the cloth away, the eyes behind the rimless bifocals blinked, and then Professor Cramer was sitting up and gasping in air.

"I thought so!" Harry exulted. "The ancient resins kept you from aging in your swift journey up from the past. You're no older than you were when the machine detonated!"

"I *feel* a lot older," Cramer muttered. "If my hair weren't grey when I *left* the past, it would be *now!*"

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Then there came a knock at the door of the quonset.

They looked up at the middle-aged gentleman there, his face taking in the scene with some concern. "I am from the Khartoum museum," he said. "When we loaned you that mummy-case, we didn't expect you to leave it in the market-place—Good heavens! What have you done with our mummy?"

Cramer smiled feebly. *"I'm* your mummy," he said, then gestured at Harry and Olga. "And I have witnesses to prove it."

"What?" gasped the man, staggering back.

"It's true," said Harry. "We were present when they wrapped him up, 'way back in— Oh damn!"

"What is it Harry?" said Olga.

"I never *did* find out the date!" he groaned. "Now the university will renege on their grant!"

"No they won't," said Olga, extending her hand. "Look what was lying on top of the mummy-case when we traveled back to this era: Proof enough that we were truly in the past!"

"Olga, I love you!" cried Harry, embracing her.

And the man from the Khartoum museum could only stare in bewilderment at the petrified rectangle she clutched, the world's first three-thousand-year-old ham sandwich.

THE END

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the ARROGANT VAMPIRE

By ARTHUR PORGES

Illustrator SUMMERS

Perhaps there is something to be said, after all, for the man—or devil—who treats everyone nicely. You never know when you'll need a stake, some day!

THE VAMPIRE materialized in the girl's room. He came right through the closed window like a swirl of mist, and a moment later stood solid and massive on the floor. He was short, plump, pale, wore a traditional black cloak, and had arrogance enough for a Chicago traffic cop. He paused for only a second at the sight of the three men awaiting him. Then he smiled, showing the two enormous canines that are typical of the breed.

"Gentlemen," he said politely in perfect French, "once again I am honored by your presence, it would seem. But there is no need to group yourselves so protectively about mademoiselle's bed. As you well know from my last visit, that can do nothing to help her."

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Moving with the sinuous grace of a great ferret, he came towards them, and reluctantly they let him pass. The girl slept soundly, under heavy sedation. Her physician and his two friends could do that much for her, at least: spare her the ordeal of awaking while the vampire fed. After his last attack, they had given her a transfusion of whole blood, so that she looked quite rosy and healthy lying there. The vampire's bluish tongue licked briefly at his purple lips, thick and moist.

"I prefer to dine alone," he remarked pointedly, eyeing the three men. "And it's not very good manners to stare like that. One would think you had never seen a vampire before."

"You first," Dr. Vrillac told one of his companions. "Go ahead, Dupuy, this is no time to vacillate."

Obviously apprehensive, the man stepped forward, menacing the cloaked figure with one arm outstretched. The vampire glanced at the fistful of herbs some ten inches from his breast, and laughed aloud.

"So you prepared for my return!" he sputtered. "Garlic, you silly people! Before I became a vampire, my friends, I was a chef. I love all flavorful herbs; they are the secret of all good French cooking. Garlic holds no terrors for me; on the contrary, see?" He opened Dupuy's flaccid fingers, grabbed a bulb, and swallowed it in one gulp. "Delicious! What a pity I must depend so completely on blood alone—me, who was noted for the variety of his cuisine. But nothing else will sustain a vampire, and so—" He finished with a typical Gallic shrug.

"I guess it's up to you now, Father Morin," Vrillac said to the third man, who wore a clerical collar.

The priest took the crucifix from his pocket and approached the vampire, holding the sacred relic brought all the way from Lourdes. They hoped the monster would cringe in horror, or at least show signs of uneasiness, as the cross came within inches of his thick nose, but he merely grinned disdainfully, and pushed it away with one finger.

"Really," he objected. "You spare me nothing. Every cliche in the book. The fact is, gentlemen, that while still alive, I became a Muslim. Your crucifix doesn't mean a thing to me. I should warn you that there is a Jewish vampire near Tours who would be even more amused." His face was a study in complacence. "Accept the unpleasant truth, my friends. There's nothing you can do. I shall drink this girl dry unless you keep replenishing her by transfusions. After

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that, I'll come for your wife"—he pointed to the doctor—"or one of your appetizing young daughters." Here he looked squarely at Dupuy, who paled. "I would have a few sips of you three instead, except that I find females of a more delicate flavor. As a former chef, my taste in such matters is quite impeccable. And in view of your recent fiasco with the garlic, I should add that this young lady's excessive use of the stuff in salad dressing makes her very tasty, indeed."

"It is my turn now," Dr. Vrillac said sternly, drawing a pistol from his pocket. The vampire stepped back in mock dismay.

"Oh, no!" he groaned. "Not a silver bullet. I was hoping you might have overlooked at least one of the traditional solutions. I suppose it's no use to point out," he said glumly, expanding his chest for the impact, "that you're slightly confused and treating me like a werewolf."

The doctor's acquiline face showed his chagrin, but he said stoutly: "Take that, inhuman fiend!" and fired at point blank range. The bullet, painstakingly cast from pure silver, thudded into the vampire's chest, but he didn't even wince.

"That's the eleventh one I'm carrying," he said almost proudly. "You've merely wasted about five hundred francs."

Dupuy, still shaken by the threat to his daughters, became abject in his surrender.

"Can't we make a deal?" he demanded anxiously. "I could get plenty of whole blood from the hospital. I have money. You wouldn't need to bother my daughters or this poor child here."

"Not a chance," was the scornful reply. "I can tap blood banks any time I like. Believe me, it's not up to the real stuff, warm and fragrant, right from the delicate blue veins of a girl. In the words of a recent American president, I'm a no-deal man!"

"I appeal to you then as a Frenchman," Father Morin said. "How can you be so cruel to your own people? Why not try German blood for a while? Or Russian?"

"Would you give up good French wine for Bock Beer?" the vampire snorted. "Besides, we vampires are not concerned with national boundaries."

"We could find your body by day and drive a wooden stake through the heart," Dr. Vrillac said grimly.

"Very true—*if* you could find it. That is the one fact about us you have right." The cold-lit eyes were full of ironic amusement. "But you see, I'm buried in the big cemetery North of town. There are at least fifteen hundred old graves there. Which

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one am I in, hein? A good question! You know, of course, that I do not disturb the surface as I come and go. Pure hydrogen gas is no more tenuous and ethereal. Can you dig up all fifteen hundred looking for that one perfectly preserved body with fresh blood on its lips? Obviously not. Besides the mere physical difficulties, the people would never stand for such desecration. And you don't even know my name—and are not likely to. So you see, gentlemen, I hold all the cards." He spread his cloak in a theatrical gesture. "And now, if you won't leave, I must feast anyhow. It is well past my usual dinner hour, thanks to your silly tricks."

HE GLIDED to the bed, pulled the coverlet down as far as the girl's throat, and bent over. It was hopeless to grapple with him; they knew his superhuman strength too well for that. On his first visit, they had tried force, only to be flung back like so many dolls. The vampire was compounded of smoke or iron as he chose, and neither could be mastered by human flesh. So rather than witness the girl's defilement, they reluctantly left the room.

"We'd better prepare for another massive transfusion," Dr. Vrillac sighed, when they had closed the door on their unhappy patient. "That's all we seem able to do for the poor child."

"But surely, Doctor," Father Morin objected, "modern science can defeat a vampire. This is 1962, not 1562."

"Yes," said Dupuy quietly. "We must find his body by day and destroy it."

"But how?" Vrillac demanded, his voice bitter. "He becomes like smoke at the grave, and passes down into his coffin without leaving the slightest trace on the surface. Science is helpless even to explain such dematerialization, much less prevent it. He was perfectly right about those fifteen hundred tombs. We have no idea which is his."

"We do know he was a chef," the priest reminded him hopefully.

"What good is that. It may not say 'Chef' on the marker. And how long has he been dead —or undead, rather? It could be ten years or two hundred, for all we know."

"You're right," Dupuy said glumly. "And the stone probably won't say anything. That cemetery was closed to further burials in 1840. Most of the graves are so old that two thirds will have quite illegible inscriptions. They use a soft stone in these parts, I happen to know."

"Still, we must try," Father Morin persisted. "There's no other way. You can't track a vam-

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pire with bloodhounds. No dog will even go near one. Besides, he goes through the air, anyhow, and often as a bat."

"Hey!" the doctor exclaimed, his eyes brightening. "There's a point, maybe. How would a dog react at the tomb itself? Would he shy away, and whine? That could tell us what we need to know."

"I doubt it," Dupuy said. "I've read everything there is on the vampire legend; and all the experts say is that dogs avoid them above ground. Once in the coffin by day, and the beast doesn't know their body from anybody else's. Besides, a dog can't smell something five or six meters underground. Even a trained truffle-hound never works that deep."

"There must be a solution," Vrillac growled. "I'll talk to some of my technical friends at the university. It is simply unbearable to have a medieval anachronism like this cow of a vampire jeering at modern science—this in the country of Pasteur!"

"We don't have much time," Father Morin reminded them. "The fiend will be back tomorrow again exactly at seven. It's easy to guess what the former chef's favorite dinner time was."

"No use to hide the poor girl again, I suppose," Dupuy said.

"You know it isn't," the doctor replied. "Didn't we move her several times this month? And yet the vampire was never more than ten minutes late for his meal. No, we must forget about defensive measures and attack. Remember the famous words of Joffre. You know, about his front collapsing, his flank threatened—nothing to do but advance."

"He had only the Boche to fight," Dupuy said. "What a pity this monster has to be one of us! A Frenchman with no patriotism—incredible."

"Let me work on our problem after consulting with some of my colleagues at the university," Dr. Vrillac said. "And now we'd better go in to the girl and prepare for that transfusion. By now the monster will have committed his dirtiness and left."

THE NEXT evening, promptly at seven, the vampire came to dinner. The three men were there again, but made no attempt to dissuade the cloaked figure. As soon as he approached the sleeping girl, they left the room.

This particular feast was not to the taste of the former chef.

"What the devil kind of blood did they give her this time?" he muttered after the first sip. "Very inferior quality; must be from some sale anemic. If they keep this up, I may have to start on their families immediately. It doesn't pay to interfere with Nature," he added, somewhat

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surprisingly for a being who violated all her laws by his very existence. "If it weren't for the fun of frustrating them, I'd have stopped as soon as the original supply was gone. That transfused stuff has never been up to the girl's own blood, anyhow. Oh, well! they say it's healthier to leave the table a little hungry; and I've had enough of this third-rate swill tonight. Zut! It's enough to make a fussy eater sick." And drawing his cloak about him, the vampire stepped to the window, dislimned, and flapped away as a large bat.

Promptly at sunrise the hunt began. There were more than fifteen hundred graves to test, which meant about a hundred apiece for the fourteen men involved. Even so, it took less than two hours to find the right one. The barely legible inscription read: "Bertrand Morlaix. 1793—1835." If there had ever been any further information on the friable stone, it had weathered away.

Two burly artisans from Father Morin's parish cut through the dry, age hardened soil with heavy spades. The coffin was four meters deep, a box of dark, mouldered wood. Not so the body inside, which was perfectly preserved, with fresh blood on the lips. For just an instant, as they drove the stake home, the cavernous eyes opened to glare hatred; then the remains crumbled to dust.

"An admirable solution, Doctor!" Dupuy exulted, knowing his daughters to be safe. "What was that stuff again?"

"Just a radioactive tracer we added to the girl's blood before the vampire came again. Once he was full of that, it took our fourteen geiger counters only two hours to locate the grave. A vampire," he added proudly, "no matter how sly, is not really a match for modern science after all!"

THE END

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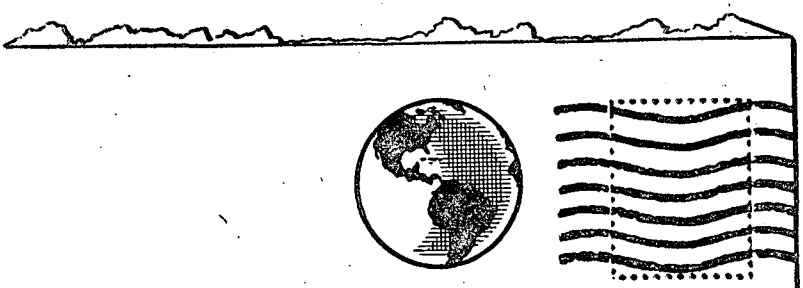

According to you...

Dear Editor:

Magnifico!!! Excellent!!! Marvelous!!! Those are just some of my reactions to the cover on the March ish. It was without a doubt the best cover you have EVER had on *Fantastic*. I guess I can speak as an expert for I have all but 8 issues of your mag. I have noticed a marvelous improvement in your covers, and do I like it!! What I wouldn't pay for the original of that. That movement of color is really terrific. More of Schomburg!!!!

Why don't you have a longer lettercolumn? Your big brother mag *Amazing* has a delightfully long lettercol. 3 letters per ish just isn't enough. From your lettercol I manage to glean more correspondents, even though my greedy self is just up to the limit with them, I want more!!! Y'hear fandom???

"Worlds of the Imperium" is turning out fine. Serials are a good thing and I don't care what anybody says. I like 'em. Let's have some good rip-roaring space opera for them. Let's go, let's get E. E. Smith on the ball.

A long time ago (way before your time, editor) *Fantastic* printed a special issue dedicated to stories of people with incredible powers. The titles might give you some clue; "The Man who Could Read Minds." "All Walls Were Mist" (he walked through solid stone), "He Took What He Wanted" (no woman could resist him), etc. etc. ad infinitum. I really used to enjoy those stories. More please.

To try to answer Pete LaRouche's question about hyperspace, here is what my idea of it is; A nuclear engine is involved and when that is switched on by some rheostat or doodad, the ship ceases to exist in our universe. Perhaps it travels in another universe, I wouldn't

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know. The danger in this is that when coming out of hyper-space you could end up in a star or planet (that is, inside the star or planet) and as far as I know, either be crushed or locked there forever.

Lenny Kaye
418 Hobart Rd.
Sutton Terrace
No. Brunswick, N. J.

● *According to fossil evidence, trilobites have been crushed in early rock strata of the earth. We all know why. But if ET explorers came here & discovered the fossils, would they think the living trilobites had been intelligent creatures killed during a trip through hyperspace?*

Dear Editor:

Concerning the complete and devastating contemplation of your January issue:

Schomberg has illoed many a cover in his day and I honestly cherish the thought that this is Schomberg at his best. I only hope, for posterity's sake, that Alex wasn't under the influence of alcohol or a similar stimulant when he illustrated your January cover.

Trivial to the extent of tedium is an exacting description of De-Ford's effort. Under no circumstances whatsoever can I consider her one of the better fem writers.

Poor Peter Arthur is in a rut, I fear. Lacking in imagination, he has resorted to rehashed plots. Indeed it's tragic, being that there is a semblance of some ability present in his short stories.

To adapt enchanting characters to unorthodox situations was once the trademark of Jack Sharkey. He must have misplaced this ability somehow as he hit rock bottom with his "According to Plan."

Without Mr. Poul Anderson the January issue would have been a dismal flop. Heretofore I thought very little of Anderson's Dominic Flandry; my opinion of Mr. Anderson's creation has changed considerably due to his "A Plague of Masters".

Porges weaves a potent yarn in the delightful fantasy about Dr. Backladder. At least Arthur is showing signs of improvement.

Christopher Greco
Birmingham, Mich.

● *Just a moment while we drop to the canvas for a count of nine. We'll be back for more.*

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Dear Editor:

It seems that Poul Anderson's tremendous output of late has considerably lowered the quality of his stories, and I don't specifically point to "A Plague of Masters" as an example. I fail to have the same admiration for Dominic Flandry, that Flandry so obviously has for himself. Except for Flandry's conceit, "A Plague of Masters" was a pretty enjoyable novel, although Anderson can do much better.

After seeing the January cover, the question immediately comes to mind: why don't you get Schomburg to do all your covers? That cover alone should win him a Hugo as far as I'm concerned.

It was hinted in the December lettercol that Sam Moskowitz might do a series for *Fantastic* on coeval sf authors. I'm sure that such a series would meet with immediate approval from your readers, at least from this one.

Michael Padgett
3230 Washington Road
Martinez, Georgia

● *Perhaps in Anderson's next novel Flandry might be taken down a peg in his self-esteem. But I doubt it. If it disturbs you, remember that men who are as outwardly conceited as Flandry, are inwardly very insecure. Yes, we are starting a new series of biogs of current SF authors, but it will be running in* Amazing.

Dear Editor:

Keep Sharkey in your magazine. His story for your February issue was top-writing, one of his best. "Project" and "Catalyst," two stories by Mr. Terry and Mr. Still, were both excellently written and thought provoking. I've never seen either of those authors in *Fantastic* before, are they new to the field? They both seem to write as though they have a bit of experience under their belt, especially Mr. Terry as he witily displayed in "Project."

When I read Chapter One of the Laumer sequel, "Worlds of the Imperium," I thought, how could such a mess ever even get a consideration of being published. The repititious *I* this and *I* that along with the chopiness was discouraging, but the new few chapters proved to be more what one would expect of *Fantastic*. Has anybody issued a complete book form yet?

I also want to give credit to Adkins for his exceptionally fine illos for Mr. Laumer's story, to Summers for that excellent cover and

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story illos, but not to Douglas for his botched conception of monkeymen.

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N. Y.

● *Terry is a newcomer; Still is a veteran. And the paperback houses are begging for Keith Laumer's novel.*

Dear Editor:

Why, oh why, when there are so many good writers and when story space is apparently so limited that you print only three—3, count them!—short stories, do you waste good space, labor and material on the trash written by David Bunch? It is downright disgusting to read the rest of the magazine and think, with pleasant anticipation, "Good! There's one more story I haven't read!"—and then, upon turning to the page, to find such utter rot as this author—and I use the term doubtfully—has been submitting. Some of it reads like something written by a mental patient or a moron.

Honestly, there are too many interesting, well-written stories making the rounds for you to waste your material, my money and time—and good humor—on such utter tripe. If you run out of resources, I'll even send you one I wrote, though it isn't a "Fantastic" type, exactly. Make me mad enough, however, and I might try to concoct one that is!

Outside of the stuff printed under the name of David R. Bunch, I enjoy your magazine very much. I am a subscriber, and periodically, when I read all the completed serials and clear my bookshelves, my copies of all *Fantastic* and other sf mags go to the San Saba County Public Library, where Mrs. Brown, the librarian, tells me they are read and re-read until they are worn out. Our small-town newsstands sell out before the demand is satisfied!

Mrs. Alvin A. Stewart
Route 2, Box 64-A
San Saba, Texas

● *Into each life some rain must fall—and into yours evidently a Bunch of it. Seriously, though, we wish more readers would pass on their copies to libraries as you do. That's a wonderful idea.*

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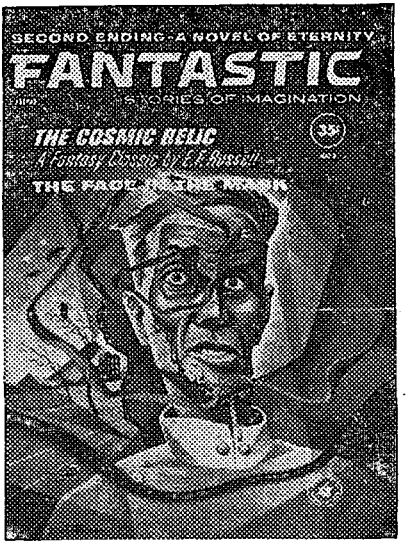
A pulse-quickening novel of immense scope and sweep begins in the June issue of FANTASTIC Stories.

Second Ending by brilliant British author **James White,** is truly a novel of eternity and infinity. Its concept will leave you breathless.

But not far behind in excitement and drama are: *The Cosmic Relic,* a classic story by **Eric Frank Russell** that has never before appeared in a professional magazine in this country; and a story by a new writer that we think is one of the finest ever written —*The Face in the Mask,* a slashing satire filled with inventiveness.



PLUS other stories, and all our usual departments. The June issue of FANTASTIC will be on your newsstand May 18.

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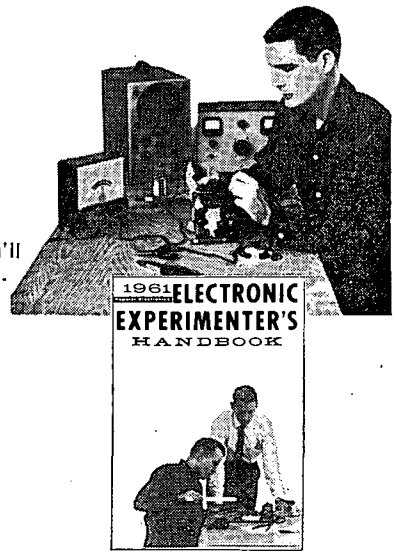

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